Nameless St☆r: Codename Anastasia

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Nameless St☆r: Codename Anastasia

by foolish_zainka

Summary

Non-profit fan translation of 'Nameless Star' from Codename Anastasia. By fans, for fans.

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RIDIBOOKS
•Novel (Korean)
•Manhwa (Korean)

TAPPYTOON
•Manhwa (English)

Notes

Since the official English translation of the first volume of CA is coming out this winter (yay!), I've decided to translate the second volume for those who can't read Korean. Please be patient with me, as translating and formatting takes a bit of time.

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The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•SPANISH DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

Reboot

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

VOLUME 6

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Outskirts of Havana, Cuba.

In this small town far from the city center, everything was quiet, even in broad daylight. Dust swirled over the road, baked by the sun, disturbed only by the occasional passing of a worn-out truck or bicycle, both weathered by time.

None of the tightly packed buildings lining the narrow road were in good condition. All of them had a terrible appearance, with peeling paint and deep cracks. Tangled electric cables clung to the walls like twisted vines, snaking past each window. Only the faint echoes of TV or radio sounds filtering through the permanently open windows served as a reminder that the buildings weren't abandoned.

Even the only apartment complex in the city wasn't spared. The walls and doors had weakened under the relentless heat, making it difficult to expect any soundproofing. You could feel the vibrations every time a neighbor opened or closed their door. The wooden blinds had long lost their ability to shield the inside and now merely blocked out the scorching sun. During the occasional rainstorms, even the blinds had rotted. There was no internet service, let alone network coverage. It felt as though time had slowed to a crawl in this place.

The stifling nighttime humidity became unbearable as the sun rose, to the point where rubber sandals stuck to the pavement under the blazing heat. No one dared to go outside until the afternoon when the heat had subsided a bit. Around that time, on the third floor of the last house in the block, the normally silent front door opened with a creak.

An Asian man stepped out, moving his hand. A man cooling himself in the hallway, a woman hanging laundry, and an elderly man staring out of the window all paused, curiously observing the peculiar foreigner.

"Alright, I've finished showing you around the place where I'll be staying for a week, so how about we head out and explore the area for a bit? You see, the cool thing about this place is that the hallways are arranged in a pattern similar to the letter 'ㅁ' in Korean, with a courtyard

in the center. There were already many apartments of this style in Korea before, weren't there? If you look over here, you'll find the central staircase leading to the courtyard, and there's another set of stairs leading outside at both ends of the hallway. Though I don't think there's an elevator here. I mean, this apartment only has three floors anyway. From here, you should be able to see the panoramic view of the city I showed you earlier through the window. It seems small, but there are a couple of stores and plenty of residential areas, though I must admit it's hard to navigate because there are no traffic signs or directions. It's still daylight, but there's hardly anyone walking around outside. It's incredibly hot in Cuba, so I guess everyone's just staying indoors to rest. I mean, to be totally honest, I just stepped out, and I already want to go back inside. The air is so stifling it feels like I'm in a sauna. I heard this place gets a lot of showers."

The Asian man chattered nonstop toward his camera. Judging by his attire and behavior, he seemed like a typical tourist. To be more precise, he was a vlogger sharing his life experiences through his recordings.

"Honestly, there's not much to show you guys around here. There's no special area or historical monument nearby, and most of the city is residential. It would've been great if there were at least more businesses, but I found a grand total of three restaurants. I couldn't find a decent café or convenience store either. Though there is a supermarket over there. Should we check it out?"

After thoroughly scanning his surroundings with the camera, the man headed toward a nearby small store. Inside, cracked glass displays and a few counters contained a sparse selection of groceries and miscellaneous items... barely twenty products in total.

The store owner tensed up, suspicious of the strange foreigner. Her daughter, who had been playing nearby, quickly hid behind her back. The Asian tourist continued nonchalantly, pointing his camera at them.

"This supermarket is probably the only one in the city. It's more like a neighborhood store, so there's not much to choose from. They've got a few soft drinks, snacks, maybe some packs of tissues. Why don't we buy something since we're here?"

The foreigner suddenly paused to wave belatedly at the shop owner's daughter.

"¡Hola!"

The little girl, hiding behind her mother, shyly smiled and responded with a soft "Hello" in return. Even at first glance, her frail and fragile appearance was highlighted by the transparent tubes running to her nose. Meanwhile, the store owner's expression remained clouded with caution.

"I'll take that drink over there... No, not that one. The orange one next to it."

The store owner kept grabbing the wrong drink despite his repeated attempts to correct her. The Asian tourist captured every moment unfolding with his camera.

“To be honest, I’ve felt it since I arrived, but I find it really hard to communicate properly with the locals here. Most people seemed to understand English at the airport or in the city, but elsewhere, it’s difficult, even to buy a bottle of water. I wonder if it’s because Cuba is mostly a communist country that English hasn’t spread much around here. According to a friend of mine, if you use a U.S. mobile operator, you won’t have coverage for your entire stay in the country. So, I got myself a Cuban SIM card, but I still have no coverage, haha. My plan was to enjoy a quiet, peaceful week somewhere, but without internet access, there’s not much you can do. Anyway, if you ever plan to visit Cuba, I definitely advise learning some Spanish in advance and not relying on having internet access during your stay.”

The talkative tourist handed a dollar to the store owner. She accepted it with a conflicted expression, although she seemed somewhat grateful. It appeared she didn’t have enough money to give him change. With an indifferent gesture, the man let it slide and turned to leave.

“***Gracias.*** Alright, here’s the drink I just bought. The bottle’s pretty warm. I’m not sure if you can tell by the light, but it’s about 4 PM. By now, it should be cooling off, but it’s still scorching hot. There’s not much more to see around here, so I’m heading back home.”

The tourist captured the city’s panorama on his way back to the apartment, occasionally greeting residents he met along the way. Most responded with a smile, but some shot him dirty looks.

Unfazed, the man continued with a smile. As soon as he reached the front door, he locked it and tossed the camera onto the floor. Then, he approached the window and tore off the stifling mask from his face. Beneath it was revealed the face of Kwon Taekjoo. The boundless smile from moments before was nowhere to be found, now replaced by an expression of boredom and indifference. Kwon Taekjoo grabbed an apple rolling aimlessly across the table and stared outside the window. He glanced down at the store he had just visited. He hadn’t detected anything suspicious... yet. With a crunch, he bit into the apple and carefully surveyed the surroundings of the store. Four days had already passed.

A week ago, Kwon Taekjoo had received a summons from the Chief Director. He had been enjoying a few days of rest after successfully completing his previous mission—or at least that was what he was supposed to be doing.

However, he had spent day and night at the mercy of Zhenya, which prevented him from truly relaxing. After enduring Zhenya's demands one after the other, Kwon Taekjoo finally thought he deserved a break, only to be called back to headquarters. Needless to say, he wasn’t pleased.

“You called for me, sir?”

“Ah, you don’t look too good. And your voice doesn’t sound great either. What happened to you?”

“With all due respect, sir, I believe the matter at hand is more important than what happened to me.”

“Well, I’m sorry for calling you in during one of your rare days off,” said the Chief Director, offering a barely convincing apology.

“It’s an emergency; how could I complain about losing a day off? Anyway, what’s going on?” Kwon Taekjoo asked, a bitter expression on his face, trying to get straight to the point. Fortunately, Director Kwak didn’t bother with more pleasantries.

“Alright, I’ll cut to the chase then. Last night, several national corporations and public institutions were hit by a cyberattack. The malware they used was similar to a Trojan horse.”

“... A cyberattack? Didn’t we just implement a reinforced security program across all public institutions? I thought all employees had received official instructions to use it as well. Was it all compromised?”

“They were very clever about it... they used the very same security program we distributed to break into the system. They embedded the malware directly into the automatic update file, so even if the program's monitoring detected it, it couldn’t identify it as a threat. As a result, all the affected companies and institutions had their servers taken down, with all their data fully encrypted.”

Even after hearing Director Kwak's explanation, Kwon Taekjoo remained skeptical. The country’s security was clearly in crisis due to the large-scale cyberattack, but fighting cyberterrorism—especially in the realm of cyber threats—wasn’t part of his responsibilities. Faced with this situation, only one conclusion crossed his mind as to why he had been summoned.

“Did this attack come from North Korea?”

Alongside China and Russia, North Korea was a major player in the world of cyber hacking. Despite its isolationist and secretive nature, North Korea had developed its national operations to excel in strategic information warfare. The regime claimed it was a tactical move to swiftly address evolving international issues, but it was merely a pretext. Their highly skilled hackers targeted government agencies, military installations, critical infrastructure, businesses, and media, with South Korea being their primary target. A few years ago, one of South Korea’s largest telecommunications companies experienced a massive service outage after its financial institution was infected with North Korean malware.

But Director Kwak shook his head at Kwon Taekjoo’s guess.

“I don’t know if I should feel relieved to say this, but no, it’s not them. Our cyberterrorism response team analyzed the malware and found multiple file extensions originating from Cuba.”

“Cuba? But why would they...?”

“They’re demanding 5 million dollars to decrypt the data from each affected institution.”

Of course, they would ask for that. Recently, many hackers had been deploying ransomware against major corporations and public institutions, demanding large sums in return. They would even target financial institutions directly and extort cryptocurrency funds. Some of them had organized into a group commonly referred to as the 'cyber gang' to increase their share of the profits from attacks.

Interpol had been working tirelessly to stop the cyber gang, but their efforts had been futile. Not only was it difficult to identify each member of the gang, but authorities in China, Russia, and other implicated countries like North Korea weren't cooperating in the investigation. This was one of the reasons why it was suspected that they were protecting the cyber gang.

Kwon Taekjoo shrugged, as if indifferent.

"Isn't the standard procedure to refuse such demands?"

"Yes, but the situation has become more complicated."

"Why?"

"Apparently, some of the encrypted data contains confidential national information."

Kwon Taekjoo let out a long sigh. While it was clear that the criminals themselves were to blame, he was damn tired of seeing his country targeted time and time again.

"If we don't comply, they'll seek other sources of income. They might sell our information to North Korea, for example," Director Kwak responded, presenting the worst-case scenario.

Externally, North Korea and South Korea were still hostile toward each other. Even with occasional shifts in political power, any peace achieved was always short-lived and quickly gave way to new conflicts. There was no way the Cuban hackers were unaware of this fact.

"Even if we give in to their demands, isn't it essentially the same result? Nothing would stop them from contacting North Korea once they've pocketed our money."

"Considering they'll do anything for money, that's a likely scenario. Based on recent North Korean activity, it seems they've already shared some information."

Suddenly, a recent news headline flickered in Kwon Taekjoo's mind. A report had indicated that a large truck meant for fuel transportation had been seen at a North Korean nuclear facility. In response, North Korea had claimed that the truck was inspecting parts of a facility damaged by heavy rains. But the explanation was unconvincing, especially given the upcoming meeting of the Republic of Korea-U.S. Security Consultative Council.

"Did the leaked confidential information include military data?"

"Correct. Much of the data involves military training programs, coordination plans between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan to counter the North Korean nuclear threat, and direct communication line codes for diplomatic security. The most concerning detail is the dual contract related to the arms agreement between the U.S. and South Korea. International arms

trade usually operates through discreet networks. If those were exposed to the public, it would create significant problems, wouldn't it?"

"Yes. Very significant problems. Especially for those at the top," Kwon Taekjoo remarked with a sarcastic tone.

Director Kwak let out a small chuckle at Kwon Taekjoo's comment. Even though these interactions were carried out discreetly, there was likely a long list of individuals involved in sharing the profits—government officials, intelligence agencies, weapons manufacturers, and brokers. It was a common, or rather corrupt, practice that had been so deeply entrenched for so long that it was difficult to point fingers at any one person. The issue was that, once that hidden network was exposed, it would be hard to get out of it without severe repercussions. If there were any disruption in the supply of arms, the country's national defense would also naturally be affected.

Kwon Taekjoo ran his hand through his hair, visibly irritated.

"So, we're supposed to clean up their mess again?"

"What else can we do? Regardless of how we feel, our job is to protect national intelligence above all else."

"Well, the problem is that we don't have a way to catch these Cuban hackers. How are we supposed to do something even Interpol couldn't?"

"It wouldn't help to get tricked by the same method again, right? After the last major hacking incident, it was required that all confidential information be embedded with a domestic spy program."

"A spy program?"

"That's right. The moment the hackers open the data they stole; it'll track their exact location. If it had been designed as malware to penetrate their equipment, we would have been discovered immediately. But since the spy program is disguised as ordinary data, it'll be difficult for them to realize something's wrong."

Director Kwak pushed a tablet toward Kwon Taekjoo as he explained. The screen displayed a satellite map with a specific location marked on the outskirts of Havana, the capital of Cuba.

"They're here?"

"Yes. According to our suspicions, we believe the attack was carried out by the 'Electric Hammer.'"

"Electric Hammer?"

"It's one of the leading members of the most prominent cyber gangs in Cuba. Our analysis of the infected malware revealed the source code signature associated with 'Electric Hammer.' Of course, we won't be sure it's them until you conduct a direct investigation."

Director Kwak had said “investigation,” but Kwon Taekjoo knew he meant eliminating the criminals and destroying all the data they had managed to obtain—especially before they could hand it over to North Korea. Chasing a target hidden behind a computer screen, with no physical limitations, was like being tasked with catching a ghost.

“And by the way,” Director Kwak added, “the United States probably has a general idea of what’s happened. If they find out that the dual contract between us was leaked, they’re likely to pin the blame on us. They might even already be aware of the situation and have taken measures. If possible, you need to retrieve the data before they do. After all, long-lasting allies don’t exist... there’s no need to go against them and end up in a disadvantaged position.”

“Jeez, it feels like we’ve spent over half a century tiptoeing around the whole world.”

“Well, if we want to avoid ending up in an even worse position, it’s up to people like us to get things done. Here, take this.”

Director Kwak handed Kwon Taekjoo a new passport. In it was the blurry photo of a man in his thirties.

“You are to head to Havana immediately.”

And just like that, he had been sent to Cuba, disguised as a travel YouTuber. Supposedly, the real YouTuber had gotten into a personal conflict and was arrested in another country, which gave Kwon Taekjoo the green light to borrow his identity until his mission was complete.

At first, Kwon Taekjoo thought it would be better to disguise himself as a local, but he realized that the town was so small that he would only raise more suspicion that way. Plus, it seemed like the locals weren’t too distrustful of him, even though they were slightly uncomfortable with foreigners. Apparently, other tourists and YouTubers had visited the area from time to time.

Kwon Taekjoo sat in a battered chair and put on wireless earphones. After a few taps, a brief chime rang from the earpiece, followed by Yoon Jongwoo’s voice.

[“Hello?”]

“How’s the situation over here? I still haven’t noticed anything strange. The store owner doesn’t seem to know anything either.”

[“They seemed like an ordinary family to me too.”]

“Are you sure you traced the location correctly?”

[“Yes. Unless the detector malfunctioned, that store is the only suspicious place. The amount of data transmitted to and from that location is abnormally high compared to the surroundings.”]

Upon arriving in the city, Kwon Taekjoo had pretended to explore the area while activating a fiber-optic cable detector. The result was a strong signal around the store he had just visited,

meaning fiber-optic cables were installed throughout the area. It would have made sense for an internet café or a lodging establishment, but for such a small shop?

It was totally impossible that the shop owner had undertaken a large-scale construction project to install fiber-optic cables for her own personal use. Even putting aside, the high costs, she wouldn't have received permission from the public authorities. On the other hand, it also indicated that this small shop was receiving unusual national support.

But why?

There was only one conclusion to be drawn from all of this: this suspicious front shop housed the so-called Electric Hammer, who was receiving protection from the Cuban government.

"Yes, it makes sense for someone like him to use such a low-profile cover. Who would suspect that a shabby little store could be managing hundreds of dollars in transactions every night? It's unarmed and doesn't look like anything more than a family-run shop," Kwon Taekjoo muttered.

["Exactly."]

"The only flaw is that, for such a small store, it has an impressive number of hidden security cameras. So? Do you think you can replicate the layout inside?"

["Yes. Something close, at least."]

"'Close'? Do it properly, kid. Do you think I'm suffering through this hell just to get a half-finished map?"

["Are you even suffering? You could've fooled me; it sure seems like you're enjoying yourself. You say you hate it, but your acting skills are improving every day."]

"Oh? You must be pretty confident to be running your mouth like that. Two hours. Have it ready by then."

["What? That's impossible. It'll take me at least half a day to finish the 3D simulation!"]

"Since when do we have the luxury of working at a relaxed pace? Stop whining, kid."

["But—"]

"Time is critical in this mission. I have to finish it tonight. So, stop complaining and get to work."

["Uugh! Sunbae!"]

Kwon Taekjoo ignored Yoon Jongwoo's groaning and turned off the transmitter. Then he raised the volume on the listening device he had installed in the shop. Through his earpiece, he could hear the shop owner and her daughter chatting, along with the voices of the nearby residents. The conversations were being translated in real-time on his laptop, though they

often cut out. Most of what he could capture were purely mundane talks, like asking someone how their day had been or deciding what to have for dinner.

It wasn't long before the sun began its slow descent. Sunlight filtered through the gaps in the window shutters, its rays as bright as the sun's low position in the sky. Soon, the entire town was bathed in the golden glow of the setting sun. In the distance, a dog barked, mixing with the laughter of children, as neighboring houses that had been quiet started turning on their lights one by one. Everything was peaceful.

For his part, Kwon Taekjoo's eyes remained fixed on his laptop screen, where the footage from the store's eight security cameras was playing in real-time. His sharp gaze followed every movement, analyzing the scene with silent intensity. The quiet in the room was interrupted only by the hum of a fan in the background and the occasional crunch as he bit into an apple.

As nightfall set in, the city became enveloped in deep silence. The lights in the houses began to flicker off. Kwon Taekjoo silently slipped out of his apartment and quickly approached the store. He had equipped himself with military-grade gear designed to block any thermal signals, just in case. Wrapped in darkness, with no streetlights in sight, his two eyes glowed beneath his night-vision goggles.

As he neared the store, a faint clinking sound echoed in the distance. Moments later, a security laser passed right by his goggles—a barely visible infrared beam undetectable to the naked eye.

Had Kwon Taekjoo advanced without noticing it, the alarm would have gone off instantly, compromising his cover. For what appeared to be a simple family-run store, the level of security was abnormally high.

Kwon Taekjoo dodged the security laser with quick, precise movements. Yoon Jongwoo had already hacked into the security cameras around the shop, looping the footage from the previous night. But even so, Kwon Taekjoo ensured that he moved through the blind spots. His opponent was an experienced hacker—there was no telling when their security systems might be reset.

However, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't detect such movements from inside. After scanning the area again, he slid a tiny microphone through a crack in the front door. The device was designed to pick up even the faintest sounds and amplify them. Still, all he could hear was the hum of a fan, the ticking of a clock, and the sound of steady breathing. Perhaps everyone was asleep.

After another cautious sweep of the surroundings, Kwon Taekjoo pulled something from his clothing. It was a powerful laser cutter disguised as a pen. He slipped his hand through the metal bars on the window grate and silently sliced through the wooden shutters. Through the newly created hole, he tossed in a device resembling a yo-yo. The small apparatus rolled smoothly across the floor before coming to a stop, releasing an odorless, transparent gas. It was a mild sedative.

While waiting for the gas to spread through the house, Kwon Taekjoo moved to the front door. After inserting a small piece of iron into the lock and turning it a few times, the lock clicked open.

“I’m going in.”

[“Understood. G1 proceeding with entry.”]

After one last scan of the area, Kwon Taekjoo opened the door and stepped inside, making sure the hinges didn’t creak.

He stood for a while, surveying the silent interior. There wasn’t a single light source, making it difficult to discern what was where.

Kwon Taekjoo switched on the flashlight mounted to his rifle and quickly studied the interior of the house. His specialized goggles made the search easier, projecting a 3D map of the internal layout as well as his current position.

Moving with impeccable precision, he navigated from the living room to the master bedroom. Inside, the store owner and her partner lay unconscious side by side. He thoroughly searched the room for any other presence, even peeking inside the wardrobe, but found no traces of anything unusual.

Kwon Taekjoo exited the master bedroom and entered the adjacent room. He paused at the sight of the little girl sleeping there. It wasn’t surprising that he had heard such sharp breathing... the girl still had tubes connected to her nose. The sedative he had released earlier likely hadn’t fully affected her. Should he remove the tubes now? He hesitated, reluctant to carelessly handle someone as young and delicate as her.

[“Sunbae, did you clear the area?”]

“...Yes, mostly.”

Kwon Taekjoo quietly withdrew from the girl’s room, carefully closing the door behind him to avoid any potential disturbance.

In order to find a connection to the “Electric Hammer,” Kwon Taekjoo had conducted a background investigation on the family living in the house. They had lived here for generations. The parents had two older sons, along with the youngest daughter, who suffered from congenital respiratory failure. The eldest son had died in a car accident, while the other had gone missing.

Kwon Taekjoo had been closely monitoring the store, keeping an eye on it in depth, but had found no one else besides the couple and their daughter. A series of tragedies had left the three of them as the only remaining occupants.

But now, as he stood inside the house, Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t shake off a strange feeling of unease. There wasn’t a single family photo in sight. The same applied to any personal belongings of the deceased or missing sons.

Kwon Taekjoo's mother had been unable to get rid of the belongings of his late father and brother. In their home, there were still numerous family photos displayed on the walls from years past.

Of course, everyone dealt with the loss of a loved one in their own way, and not all people handled it like his mother. But while it was understandable in the case of a deceased child, the house seemed too devoid of any trace of the missing son.

Another suspicion lingered in his mind. Perhaps the belongings of the two sons never left because they were still being used—by them.

The fiber-optic cables scattered everywhere, the excessively high security measures, the identification of the hacker's residence by the NIS's espionage team, and even the circumstances of the missing family members... it all confirmed his suspicions. If the Cuban government was indeed protecting the "Electric Hammer," then it would have been easy to hide them under the guise of being dead or missing, thus evading any investigation.

"Where are they hiding?"

Kwon Taekjoo slowly began searching the entire house. According to what he could deduce, the hackers' hideout was hidden within the house, somewhere they could operate without attracting the attention of others. The house only had one floor, so the only possible location was the basement.

First, Kwon Taekjoo needed to find an entrance to the basement. He did a 3D scan of the interior structure, searching for any access points. Someone had been hiding here in secret for years without raising suspicion among the neighbors.

The entrance would have to be somewhere inconspicuous, easy to overlook, even if discovered by accident. Kwon Taekjoo scanned the 3D map again. His gaze locked onto the pantry inside the kitchen. It was too narrow, surrounded by walls on all sides, making it impossible to see from outside.

Kwon Taekjoo headed straight for the pantry. It was sealed with the same material as the wall, so if it weren't for the 3D map, he would have walked right past it without noticing.

To inspect the pantry's contents more closely, he flicked on a lighter. The flickering flame kept tilting to one side, apparently affected by a light breeze—although there should have been no airflow in a wall without cracks.

With certainty in his movements, Kwon Taekjoo removed the cleaning supplies and flour stored in the pantry and placed them on the floor. Then, he ran his hand over the deep counters.

Suddenly, something snagged against his hand. Instantly, he pulled at it, causing the entire pantry to fall forward with a loud thud. Behind it was a steep stone staircase leading downward.

"I found their little rat hole."

[“G1 confirms discovery of hidden passage.”]

“I’m going in. Stay put until I call you.”

[“G1 proceeding with hidden passage entry. Standing by. Sunbae, please be careful.”]

After Yoon Jongwoo’s final words of caution, Kwon Taekjoo turned off the transmitter. He gripped his rifle tightly, ready to fire at any moment, and descended into the darkness.

When he finally reached the bottom of the steep staircase, another door stood before him. On the other side was most likely the hideout of his targets. As if preparing for a possible confrontation, he switched his goggles to thermal imaging mode and attached a small grenade to the door, which would immediately blow the lock once activated.

After taking a deep breath, he detonated the grenade and fired a stray bullet through the broken gap in the door. The bomb he had tossed acted as both a smoke screen and tear gas. Everyone in the room burst into coughing fits, stumbling blindly as the air filled with a sharp, stinging gas. From their silhouettes, Kwon Taekjoo counted at least five people.

“Cough... It’s an intruder!”

One of them managed to slip past the chaos, rushing toward the exit with a knife in hand. As they got close enough for Kwon Taekjoo to make out their figure, he sidestepped and grabbed their arm. He snapped the wrist, forcing the knife to drop, and swiftly struck the back of the man’s neck as he lost his balance. With a sharp blow to a pressure point, the man collapsed, unconscious.

The next moment, the room erupted in a hail of gunfire. Bullets zipped through the thick cloud of smoke. Kwon Taekjoo pressed himself against the wall, waiting for the barrage to subside. Soon, the attackers halted, seemingly trying to pinpoint his movements. Seizing the opportunity, Kwon Taekjoo fired back in the direction of the incoming shots. Unable to respond, his opponents crumpled to the ground with a cry.

Once the gunfire ceased, Kwon Taekjoo stepped into the room. The smoke had significantly cleared by now. Through the fading haze, Kwon Taekjoo could make out the figures of several young men sprawled on the floor, as well as a small boy huddled behind them, hands covering his ears. He couldn’t have been older than fifteen or sixteen. His face was smeared with tears and snot from the effects of the tear gas.

The boy stared at Kwon Taekjoo with a terrified expression. He bore a striking resemblance to the shop owner’s daughter with the nasal tubes. Could this be the missing second son? Behind the boy was a series of computers and a storage unit capable of holding an enormous amount of data.

“Oh, wow...”

With technology becoming more accessible to younger generations around the world, Kwon Taekjoo had heard that the average age of hackers was getting younger. Still, he couldn’t help

but let out a sigh of disbelief at seeing a boy so young involved in a cyber gang that had threatened national security.

The boy looked around at the bodies of the men who had been protecting him. All of them were dressed in military gear and armed with assault rifles. They were probably stationed here to both protect and keep an eye on the boy.

“Drop your weapon and raise your hands,” Kwon Taekjoo ordered the lone boy. Though the kid was shaking in fear, he seemed incapable of releasing the gun he clumsily gripped. Instead, he lifted his trembling arms to point the barrel at Kwon Taekjoo.

Kwon Taekjoo sighed. After a brief exchange of words, he strode toward the boy with long steps. Nervously, the boy pulled the trigger.

But the bullet shot harmlessly toward the ceiling. Kwon Taekjoo had swiftly sidestepped, knocking the boy’s hands aside. His own gun struck the kid’s face, causing blood to spill from his nose. While the boy instinctively held his nose, Kwon Taekjoo quickly subdued him, pinning his arms behind his back. After securing the boy, he informed Yoon Jongwoo of the situation.

“Area cleared.”

[“G1, the site is cleared. Proceed with data retrieval.”]

Kwon Taekjoo took a deep breath and scanned the room again before pulling out the prepared USB devices and plugging them into the main PC and the storage units. Once the USB was recognized, he quickly copied all the backup data and temporary files. Of course, this wasn’t the end of the process. It wouldn’t be long before the USB’s formatting program automatically activated, permanently erasing all files from each PC.

It was then that a loud vibration shook the floor above. The entire ground felt as though it was being pushed down by a heavy force. Although faint, Kwon Taekjoo could make out the roar of an engine. Something was approaching the house rapidly from above.

Perhaps the boy had already called for backup from the Cuban military. But even the boy seemed unsure of what was happening. Maybe the neighbors had notified the authorities after being awakened by the gunshots. But still, for a neighborhood call, the response was incredibly fast.

Kwon Taekjoo tried to assess the situation by speaking directly into his communicator.

“What’s going on?”

[“Sunbae, a couple of strange vehicles are moving in on the location.”]

“How many?”

[“Two. They look like armored cars.”]

“Are they police special forces? Or the Cuban military?”

[“They don’t have flashing lights. No identifying emblems either.”]

“Find out who they’re connected to.”

[“Understood.”]

By that time, the data retrieval had finally completed. Kwon Taekjoo yanked the USB out and tucked it into his inner pocket.

At that moment, he sensed a presence behind him. Someone was coming down the stairs. The boy, still tied up on the floor, seemed to have noticed the footsteps too and trembled in fear.

Kwon Taekjoo focused intently on the approaching footsteps before quickly turning to face them. His rifle aimed directly at a familiar face. It was the little girl with the nasal tubes. Just as he had feared, the sedative hadn’t fully worked on her due to her condition.

The girl, for her part, seemed unable to comprehend the situation. Why were her parents asleep like they were dead? Who was the dark-skinned man in front of her, and why was her brother tied up in front of him? Who were the men on the floor, and why was there blood splattered everywhere? To her, everything must have seemed like a nightmare. She shuddered violently, as if in shock. It was as if she were hyperventilating.

“Calm down, don’t be scared. I won’t hurt you,” Kwon Taekjoo tried to reassure her, extending both hands in a non-threatening manner. But the girl looked as if she were on the verge of bursting into tears. A wet spot began to form at her feet.

As Kwon Taekjoo agonized over the situation, the sound of the engine grew louder and clearer. As if it were a signal, Yoon Jongwoo’s voice rang through the transmitter.

[“Sunbae! I think it’s a U.S. PMC (Private Military Company). I don’t like the look of this. You need to get out of there!”]

Moments later, something tumbled down the stairs with a series of thuds, stopping in front of the blank-faced girl. It was a high-powered grenade—one capable of easily demolishing the entire basement.

“Damn it, take cover!” Kwon Taekjoo shouted in horror. A moment later, a massive explosion rocked the room, plunging everything into darkness.

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Chapter End Notes

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Reboot

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“Ugh...”

Kwon Taekjoo groaned as he opened his eyes. Disoriented, his mind felt clouded, as if he had lost consciousness again. The first thing that hit him was the overpowering smell of gunpowder and dust in the air. He tried moving his body, his limbs aching and cramping, but still functioning. His earpiece transmitter must have been destroyed, as all he could hear was an ear-piercing ringing sound. Frustrated, he yanked it out and tossed it aside, but the ringing in his ears persisted.

Kwon Taekjoo realized there was blood trickling down his forehead, a thick scarlet liquid dripping over his eyes. He must have suffered a scalp wound during the explosion. The blood blurred his vision, staining everything in a murky red.

His surroundings were covered in pitch-black darkness. From what he could tell, the entire house had collapsed due to the explosion. Before he could be buried alive, he scrambled toward a small gap between two fallen structures, barely making it out alive.

“Damn it...”

Kwon Taekjoo cursed under his breath, just as he began lifting his bruised, battered body off the ground. Suddenly, something stirred in his arms. It was the little girl with the nasal tubes, squirming weakly beneath him. Instinctively, he must have shielded her from the blast with his body. She was still barely conscious, her breathing labored but clear, and her heartbeat rapid. Thankfully, she didn’t appear to have any external injuries.

“Uhh... ahhh...”

The girl began to regain consciousness, and when she opened her eyes to see Kwon Taekjoo, her face turned white with fear. Kwon Taekjoo immediately covered her mouth to stifle her scream and put a finger to his lips. He met her eyes and gently shook his head. Though clearly terrified and on the verge of tears, the girl nodded in understanding.

Kwon Taekjoo still had no idea who had carried out the attack or what their exact purpose was. Yoon Jongwoo had indicated that it might be a PMC, but Kwon needed more details.

Holding his breath, Kwon Taekjoo listened for any sounds outside. For a moment, all he could hear was the heavy thud of military boots moving across the ground. Not long after, he heard the sound of car doors opening and slamming shut. There seemed to be at least four vehicles. Facing them head-on would be a challenge in any case, but with the girl in tow, it would be nearly impossible. His only choice was to wait patiently for them to leave.

Moments later, the roar of the armored vehicles' engines filled the air as they began to drive off. It seemed they were abandoning the site, likely believing they had completed their mission.

Cautiously, Kwon Taekjoo peeked out from his hiding spot. The area was mostly clear now, except for a few distant figures. Sensing his opportunity, he gestured for the little girl to follow him as he crept toward safety. She hesitated for a moment, her eyes flickering back toward the house, filled with an overwhelming sense of loss.

"Pablo..."

Kwon Taekjoo followed her gaze to the boy lying unconscious on the ground. It was the same boy he had subdued earlier, the one they now knew as the real "Electric Hammer." Most likely, he was the brother of the girl. His lower body had been crushed by the rubble from the collapsed building. Kwon Taekjoo couldn't be certain if he was still alive.

He didn't have any obligation to save them both. In fact, his mission was to retrieve the data and escape before his identity was compromised. Under normal circumstances, he would have already made his getaway. But as he looked at the little girl, desperately clinging to hope for her brother's survival, he couldn't just turn his back and walk away.

"Aah... get out of there first,"

"No! Pablo!"

She cried, resisting as Kwon Taekjoo pulled her away. He dragged the girl out of harm's way, even as she kicked and scratched him in desperation. Once she was safe, he returned through the narrow gaps between the wreckage. When he reached the boy, Kwon Taekjoo checked for a pulse. It was weak, but there—he was still alive.

With a sigh, Kwon Taekjoo reached into his now-tattered military gear. His hand found a small device, something he had carried for emergencies. A compact tool resembling a pen. It was unlikely that it had survived the blast, but he held onto a glimmer of hope. He placed the pen-shaped tool underneath the large slab of debris pinning the boy's body and activated it. The mechanical actuator inside began to buzz, slowly lifting the heavy piece of rubble.

As soon as there was a small opening, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed the boy by the collar and yanked him free from the debris. Sweat drenched his body as he heaved the unconscious boy through the narrow passage, feeling dizzy and lightheaded from the exertion.

“Ha... damn it. Why do I have to go through this crap?” he muttered under his breath.

He finally managed to drag the boy to a safe distance and collapsed to catch his breath. The girl, her face streaked with dirt and tears, immediately rushed to her brother’s side, calling his name over and over again. Kwon Taekjoo glanced around at the destruction. He had no idea what had become of the boy’s parents, but judging by the state of the house, it was highly unlikely they had survived. It was a grim situation, but Kwon Taekjoo didn’t have time to linger.

As the girl continued crying, the lights of nearby houses began to flicker on one by one. It seemed that the neighbors had been alerted to the commotion. In all likelihood, someone had already reported the incident to the police or local authorities. At this point, it was up to them to care for the two children.

With no time to waste, Kwon Taekjoo forced his exhausted body to rise and sprinted back to his own apartment. He bounded up the stairs, two at a time, making his way to the rooftop to track the armored vehicles. It didn’t take long for him to spot the tail lights of two massive vehicles speeding toward the outskirts of the town. Based on their size and the fact that they had arrived so quickly in the dead of night, he had no doubt that they were the ones responsible.

Yoon Jongwoo had mentioned the possibility of a U.S. private military company (PMC). But how had a PMC managed to get into Cuba? Were they working under some kind of disguise, just like Kwon Taekjoo? And for what reason?

“The United States probably has a general idea of what’s happened. If they find out that the dual contract between us was leaked, they’re likely to pin the blame on us. They might even already be aware of the situation and have taken measures.”

The words of Director Kwak echoed in Kwon Taekjoo’s mind. It was possible that the U.S. had discovered the leak of the dual contract, just as they had feared. But would they really take such drastic action as blowing up the hacker’s hideout without waiting for the NIS to act? It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility, considering the U.S. had a tendency to bulldoze over anyone in pursuit of their own security and interests.

The problem was, they had interfered without any prior warning or authorization. The leak of confidential information was a delicate matter, not something you casually shared with even your closest allies. So how had they found out? What was most troubling was the precise timing of their attack—it was almost too perfect, as if they had been waiting for Kwon Taekjoo to make a move. It was as though they had known his every step, every detail of his plan, up until the last minute. Maybe they had been watching him from the start.

If Kwon Taekjoo hadn’t made it out alive tonight, he would have been left to take the fall for an attack being framed as terrorism. Cuba would undoubtedly argue that innocent citizens had been sacrificed, and South Korea would be forced to bear the full burden for the civilian

and financial damages. And yet, the U.S. still called itself an ally of South Korea? A bitter laugh escaped Kwon Taekjoo.

“Those bastards. Is this how they decided to play?”

Kwon Taekjoo gritted his teeth. Not only had they sabotaged his operation like sneaky rats, but they had thrown everything into chaos. There was no way he was going to let them get away with it.

At that moment, the distant wail of a police siren pierced the night. It seemed that someone had finally reported the incident. Kwon Taekjoo needed to escape before they cornered him.

He hurried down the stairs, only to run into a resident who had stepped out to check on the noise. The man froze when he saw Kwon Taekjoo’s disheveled, bloodied appearance and let out a terrified scream. The commotion drew more curious neighbors out of their homes. One of them quickly alerted the police, who had just arrived at the scene, immediately pointing at Kwon Taekjoo.

“...Shit.”

With no other choice, Kwon Taekjoo rushed back to the rooftop. Without breaking stride, he sprinted toward the edge and leaped onto the neighboring building. The police scattered in confusion, surrounding both buildings in their pursuit. Several officers raced up the stairs, hoping to cut him off.

“Stop right there!”

The police burst onto the rooftop, immediately aiming their guns at Kwon Taekjoo as he backed away, assessing the situation. Without warning, he dashed toward the edge of the rooftop. The officers opened fire, but Kwon Taekjoo didn’t hesitate. He vaulted over the railing.

In an instant, his figure disappeared from the rooftop. The police, who had been firing warning shots, rushed to the edge to peer over. But Kwon Taekjoo was nowhere to be found. All that remained was the faint smoke wafting from the shattered windows of the crumbling buildings.

“He’s over there!”

The officers quickly radioed for backup. Those stationed below spread out, trying to surround the area. Some of them rushed up the building’s stairwells to close off any potential exits.

Suddenly, the loud roar of an engine echoed from inside the dark building. A sleek, black motorcycle shot out of the shadows like a predator on the hunt. The police, stunned for a moment, quickly scrambled to react.

It was none other than Kwon Taekjoo. For emergencies just like this, he had personally modified the motorcycle, boosting its power to an astonishing 300 horsepower with a top

speed of 400 kilometers per hour. The vehicle moved with the grace and agility of a cheetah, practically gliding over the ground.

The police, caught off guard, hastily called for reinforcements. Within minutes, several patrol cars had joined the chase, blocking off Kwon Taekjoo's escape from all directions. But with swift and precise maneuvers, he deftly weaved through narrow gaps that normal cars couldn't pass through.

The police radios buzzed with frantic communication as they chased after him relentlessly. The wailing of sirens blared from every direction, making it feel as though they might split his head open. Kwon Taekjoo kept accelerating, leaving the growing swarm of police cars far behind.

However, his night-time escape came to an abrupt halt. A police car had cut him off, blocking the road ahead. With residential buildings on both sides, there was no room to escape. He was surrounded, with squad cars encircling him from the front and back, trapping him like a cornered animal.

Despite the looming obstacles, Kwon Taekjoo pushed his motorcycle to the maximum speed, charging straight at the squad car ahead. The two vehicles hurtled toward each other at breakneck speed. The officers braced themselves for the impending collision, but just as they were about to crash, Kwon Taekjoo lifted the front wheel of his motorcycle and soared over the police car in a breathtaking leap. For a moment, the officers stood in stunned disbelief, watching as the motorcycle seemed to fly above them. Then, with renewed urgency, they resumed their chase.

Ahead of him was a long stone staircase leading to a higher platform. Without hesitation, Kwon Taekjoo angled his bike toward the stairs, lifting the front wheel again to clear each step. The rear wheel thudded against the stone steps as he accelerated rapidly, shooting up the staircase. The police spotted him just as he cleared the last step, frantically shouting over their radios as they scrambled to follow him.

After clearing the final step, Kwon Taekjoo sped across a rooftop wall and launched himself off the edge, propelling the bike onto the roof of the next building. Without losing speed, he continued jumping from rooftop to rooftop, in hot pursuit of the armored vehicles he had been tracking earlier. Below, the Cuban police could only watch in astonishment as the sleek, black motorcycle seemed to fly over their heads. They might have believed it was a winged lion rather than a piece of machinery.

Finally, Kwon Taekjoo caught sight of the armored vehicles from the PMC. By now, they must have realized they were being followed. It wasn't exactly hard to figure out, given all the police cars with flashing lights trailing behind them.

Kwon Taekjoo aimed his wristwatch at the rear of one of the vehicles and pressed a button on the side. Instantly, the watch's cover flipped open, shooting out a small tracking device that stuck to the bumper of the vehicle. A moment later, the screen on his watch flickered, displaying a basic satellite map and the vehicle's location.

Before long, the road ahead forked into two directions. The two armored vehicles split up, each taking a different path. Kwon Taekjoo chose to follow the one without the tracker.

Two men emerged from the vehicle, one poking out of the roof, the other from the backseat, each armed with a machine gun and a rifle. They began firing relentlessly at Kwon Taekjoo, bullets striking his helmet. The bulletproof visor cracked under the onslaught, and if it hadn't been reinforced, his head would have been blown clean off.

"Damn bastards. You really want to test me, huh?"

Kwon Taekjoo swerved his motorcycle into a narrow alleyway. The snipers on the armored vehicle scanned the area anxiously as the roar of the motorcycle engine grew louder and softer by turns. They caught fleeting glimpses of Kwon Taekjoo's bike darting between the buildings, only for it to vanish again.

How long had it been? The motorcycle's engine roared louder as it neared, yet Kwon Taekjoo was nowhere in sight. The sniper perched on the top of the vehicle, scanning the rooftops, suddenly shouted in alarm.

"He's up there!"

Before they could react, Kwon Taekjoo's motorcycle came crashing down from above, straight into the open hatch of the armored vehicle. As he descended from the roof, he unleashed a relentless barrage of gunfire, tearing apart any chance of resistance. Once he landed on the dented roof, he tossed a grenade inside the open hatch. Seconds later, the vehicle rocked with a small explosion and began to slow down until it came to a complete stop. Kwon Taekjoo couldn't detect any movement from inside.

At any moment, the Cuban police would swarm the area. Their sirens were already approaching fast. Just to be sure, Kwon Taekjoo quickly shot out the front tires of the armored car to ensure it couldn't escape before fleeing the scene.

Checking his wristwatch, Kwon Taekjoo saw the tracker moving steadily on the second vehicle. Once the Cuban police began their investigation, it wouldn't take long for them to figure out who was behind the supposed terrorist attack. Technically, he didn't need to chase down the other vehicle to clear himself of any potential false accusations.

But simply letting them go didn't sit well with him. After all, they had tried to kill him and frame him for terrorism after meddling in his mission. He wasn't about to let them get away with it. They wouldn't try the same stunt twice once they learned not to play dirty tricks.

Kwon Taekjoo revved his motorcycle, tracking his target as it continued to move. Weaving between buildings, through narrow alleyways and staircases, he pushed himself to the limit. Before long, he caught up to the second armored vehicle, speeding past police cars trying to block his path. The police made several attempts to ram him off the road, but Kwon Taekjoo slipped through every gap with expert precision.

The chase seemed endless as he circled around the city. At last, Kwon Taekjoo found himself face-to-face with the second armored vehicle as it came charging toward him at full speed, its

power enough to crush anything in its way. The distance between them shrank quickly, leaving little time for a final shot. Kwon Taekjoo gritted his teeth and charged head-on at the approaching vehicle.

When they were close enough to see each other clearly, Kwon Taekjoo's motorcycle suddenly crashed to the side. Now free from his bike, Kwon Taekjoo slid underneath the armored vehicle, his back scraping along the pavement. The vehicle's massive tires threatened to crush his body at any moment. Had he not ducked his head just in time, the exposed, jagged metal beneath the vehicle would have torn his face apart.

In an instant, Kwon Taekjoo managed to escape from beneath the armored vehicle. When the passengers inside realized he was still alive, they stopped abruptly. A sniper emerged from the top hatch, aiming a machine gun at Kwon Taekjoo. But before he could fire, the vehicle exploded in a massive blast. Moments earlier, Kwon Taekjoo had attached a high-powered battery to the underside of the vehicle. The car flipped over onto its back, erupting into another thunderous explosion.

"Haa, haa…"

Kwon Taekjoo crouched down, taking a moment to catch his breath as shards from the explosion rained around him. In the distance, the faint sound of helicopter blades could be heard overhead. When he looked up, the bright searchlights of a Cuban police helicopter flooded him with light. In no time, a swarm of police cars arrived, surrounding both Kwon Taekjoo and the armored vehicle, now reduced to little more than steel debris. Dozens of laser sights focused on Kwon Taekjoo, painting his figure in red.

"Don't move!"

"Hands in the air!"

"Haa… today's not my lucky day…"

Kwon Taekjoo obediently lowered his weapon and tossed aside the rifle he had been carrying. As he raised his arms, he subtly tore off a small device from his clothes, holding it in his hand.

The armed special forces unit cautiously advanced toward him. Kwon Taekjoo knew this was his last chance to escape before being completely cornered. As he waited for them to get closer, he carefully shifted the small bomb in his hand. If things went wrong, Kwon Taekjoo could easily get injured and trigger a panic-fueled shootout with the officers. But it was the only card he could play at that moment.

"Don't move! Don't move!"

"Turn around!"

The special forces unit was nearly upon him when the hum of more helicopter blades resonated above. Everyone on the scene, including Kwon Taekjoo, looked up at the sky. The

police helicopter's spotlight, which had been focused on Kwon Taekjoo, faltered before disappearing completely.

A new helicopter appeared in the distance. At first glance, Kwon Taekjoo could tell it wasn't a military unit. Its fuselage was so dark that it was barely distinguishable in the dim lights. No identifying symbols or emblems were visible. The officers exchanged nervous glances as the helicopter approached with an ominous intent.

Their confused whispers quickly turned into shouts of terror. The police helicopter had been warning the newcomer to stay away when, without warning, the rebel helicopter shot it down. Black clouds of smoke billowed from the falling aircraft as parachutes deployed from the rogue helicopter. The Cuban police and special forces were thrown into chaos by the sudden attack, scrambling to regain control and fight back. But before they could even react, an unknown grenade exploded above them.

Blinded by the flash, everyone present cried out in shock. The bright white light overwhelmed their vision, making it impossible to tell front from back. No matter how much they blinked or rubbed their eyes, they couldn't see a thing.

Meanwhile, the sound of the helicopter blades grew louder and louder. The powerful gusts of wind whipped violently through everyone's hair and clothing, making it almost impossible to stay on their feet.

"Ah… what the hell…!"

Kwon Taekjoo, too, was struggling against the fierce wind and blinding light when, suddenly, a long rope ladder descended from the helicopter. A large figure swung down toward him. Kwon Taekjoo tried to defend himself, but a familiar scent overwhelmed his senses. When he looked up in disbelief, a strong arm wrapped around his waist. His body instantly recognized the touch.

"...Zhenya?" he murmured in confusion. The man in front of him let out a low, familiar chuckle… a laugh he knew all too well.

"Taekjoo. Did you have fun causing trouble?"

Even in the midst of all the chaos, Kwon Taekjoo unmistakably recognized that distinctive voice.

"It's time to go home now."

How on earth had he found him? For someone with diplomatic ties, Zhenya seemed all too eager to attack security forces in a foreign country.

"Crazy bastard," Kwon Taekjoo sighed as he tightened his grip around Zhenya's neck. Zhenya's arm only squeezed his back tighter in response. Just moments ago, Kwon Taekjoo had been on the verge of losing his mind, but Zhenya's touch was all it took to calm his nerves.

The rope automatically began to coil upward again, effortlessly lifting them both into the helicopter. The police fired at them belatedly, but the helicopter quickly ascended beyond their reach.

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"Ugh..."

Kwon Taekjoo barely managed to catch his breath as he climbed into the helicopter. He discarded his goggles, mask, and helmet—they had long since lost their usefulness. He ran a hand through his flattened hair when, suddenly, Zhenya grabbed him by the chin and dragged his tongue slowly from Kwon Taekjoo's lips to just below his nose. The pressure on his cheeks reminded him of the sharp pain he had been ignoring until that moment. His mouth was probably torn on the inside, and his lips, now slick with saliva, tingled with a sudden sting. Kwon Taekjoo suspected the moisture beneath his nose wasn't just from Zhenya.

"Tastes strange," Zhenya murmured, licking his own lips. Quite the ironic complaint from someone who had the habit of licking Kwon Taekjoo whenever he pleased.

"Well, who told you to lick me?" Kwon Taekjoo snapped, frowning as he turned his head and shoved Zhenya's hand away.

"Let go of me, you bastard."

"You always leave with your head held high, only to come crawling back bruised and beaten."

"Does it make sense to come back without a single scratch when I'm working as an active field agent? If I cared that much about self-preservation, I'd have quit this job a long time ago."

"A single scratch?"

Zhenya looked Kwon Taekjoo up and down with disbelief. Truth be told, it was hard to find a single part of Kwon Taekjoo's skin that wasn't covered in injuries. And that was without even checking under his military gear. His ears were still numb from nearly being blown apart in the explosion.

"I was so close to finishing things without any complications this time, but then other guys had to interfere… Wait, before that. Why are you here? I explicitly told you not to follow me," Kwon Taekjoo demanded, suddenly shifting the focus of his complaints to interrogate Zhenya.

This wasn't the first time Zhenya had shown up on one of Kwon Taekjoo's missions. Every time Kwon Taekjoo was on a mission, Zhenya followed him, almost flaunting his presence for everyone to see. It was already a headache whenever he appeared, but Zhenya also had a knack for directly interfering with Kwon Taekjoo's missions, just like he was doing now. As a Russian diplomat, Zhenya should have been careful with his actions, but it seemed he didn't care in the slightest.

"Are you saying I followed you?"

"What? Am I wrong?"

"Of course you are. I was simply running out of my usual cigars, so I came to pick out a few that suited my taste. Cuban cigars are the best, after all. I was about to head home after taking care of that, but by chance, I found my lover wandering around. So the reason I'm here and why I picked you up is purely personal."

Kwon Taekjoo clicked his tongue at the ridiculous excuse. Did Zhenya really think such an absurd explanation would fly with both his country and Cuba? Sometimes, Kwon Taekjoo wondered if Zhenya wasn't just stubborn but also a bit too simple-minded. Did the world's complications really seem that insignificant and boring to him? Kwon Taekjoo always felt a wave of frustration when he fell into Zhenya's traps, and for some reason, he knew this time would be no exception.

He brushed his bangs aside. Now wasn't the time to vent his frustrations on Zhenya. Leaning toward the window, he surveyed the situation below. A line of police vehicles chased after them, their lights flashing. There didn't appear to be any other air reinforcements, suggesting they might avoid an aerial confrontation. Of course, that didn't guarantee they'd escape Cuban airspace unharmed.

"So, where are we heading? They'll close off this airspace any minute now."

"Well, considering a little thief just blew up their precious source of income, I'm sure they're desperate to catch him. You'd better lie low for a while."

"Ha... You think I don't know that? Where and how exactly do you suggest I lie low?"

"If you don't have a place to hide right away, why not borrow a raccoon's den for the time being?"

“...A raccoon?”

Zhenya clearly wasn’t referring to himself. Maybe he had a contact nearby with a place to stay. After all, Cuba and Russia had friendly relations, so it seemed like a reasonable assumption. Still, it was hard to guarantee that kind of support from a Cuban when Zhenya was helping someone who was literally an enemy of the state.

It wasn’t long before the helicopter began to descend slowly. Below them, a nearly 100-meter yacht swayed gently over the deep blue waters. Was Zhenya really planning to land on it? It seemed absurd to think that a not-so-little yacht was their grand escape plan while being chased as potential terrorism suspects. The police vehicles that had been pursuing them gathered at the dock, watching helplessly from the other side of the water.

Sure enough, Zhenya landed the helicopter on the yacht and turned off the engine. The rapid revolutions of the blades slowed to a halt. As if nothing was amiss, the yacht’s crew appeared to secure the helicopter. Not a single one of them was armed. One of the crew members approached and opened the door with almost mechanical precision. Zhenya pulled Kwon Taekjoo to his feet, snapping him out of his dazed state as he watched the scene unfold.

“Get off.”

Kwon Taekjoo let Zhenya lead him, but he couldn’t help staring around in disbelief. Just moments ago, he had been fighting for his life in a high-stakes chase. Now, within minutes, he found himself on a massive yacht. The entire situation was so surreal and disorienting that he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“What is this?”

“I told you, it’s a raccoon’s den.”

“And who exactly is this ‘raccoon’?”

“Does it really matter?”

“Of course it matters! Have you forgotten the situation we’re in?”

“What situation? As far as I’m concerned, I’m just here for the strictly personal reason of picking up some cigars… so, I guess we’re on vacation now?”

Kwon Taekjoo was about to lose it at Zhenya’s casual response. He couldn’t fathom how Zhenya always stayed so calm and collected in the midst of chaos and upheaval. Even on a battlefield, Zhenya would sip tea while bombs and bullets whizzed past him.

Even now, Zhenya walked away as if nothing was wrong. Kwon Taekjoo grabbed his arm and spun him around.

“Stop playing games, idiot.”

“Who’s playing games now?”

“Don’t tell me you actually bought this yacht.”

“Why? Do you want it?”

“No. I’m asking if it’s yours.”

“If I wanted to, I could make it mine right here and now.”

“Ugh, stop beating around the bush and answer my questions. Whose yacht is this?”

“You’ll find out soon enough. But that’s not really what matters right now, is it?”

Zhenya continued to dodge Kwon Taekjoo’s questions and headed down to the lower deck with a sense of familiarity, as if he were at home. Meanwhile, the yacht sailed slowly but steadily toward some unknown destination. Kwon Taekjoo cast one last bitter glance at the flashing police lights on the dock before following Zhenya.

The crew members they passed along the way greeted them again. Most of them were Hispanic. For some reason, they all treated Kwon Taekjoo like royalty, despite the fact that he was just a foreigner being pursued by Cuban authorities. He had no idea what was going on.

Since the yacht was enormous, they had to use an elevator to move between floors. Kwon Taekjoo stood next to Zhenya in a glass elevator as they ascended to the second deck. The interior of the yacht was visible through the transparent walls. On the other side of the glass, he saw a vast open lobby, with crystal chandeliers hanging in the center. Soft music floated through the air, and a heavy fragrance masked the typical smell of a ship. It all reminded Kwon Taekjoo of a luxury hotel. He couldn’t help but worry about who might own this extravagant yacht and what connection they had to Zhenya.

After a while, the elevator stopped. As the doors opened, a completely silent hallway greeted him, a stark contrast to the lively lobby below. Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t sense the presence of any crew members. He stood still, instinctively wary of his surroundings, but Zhenya stepped out and nodded.

“This way.”

Kwon Taekjoo figured Zhenya might be planning to lay low here until they reached their destination. After all, they had to be ready to act like stowaways. For a hiding place, the yacht itself seemed excessively luxurious, but compared to the other areas they had just passed, this space was quiet and welcoming.

“They said we could use the yacht’s facilities however we like during our stay.”

“Ha… who said that?”

“You don’t need to know that, Taekjoo.”

Zhenya remained tight-lipped about who had granted him such a favor. Even though they had grown very close to one another, Zhenya still kept plenty of secrets. Of course, the same

could be said for Kwon Taekjoo, so he couldn't exactly complain. All he could do was glare in frustration at the back of Zhenya's head.

Finally, Zhenya stopped in front of a set of large double doors with hinges that hinted at the size of the room beyond. As expected, when Zhenya swung them open, a spacious room unfolded before them. It was furnished with a large, comfortable sofa, a grand piano, and a minibar, indicating that it was a living area. A ceiling fan buzzed softly above, and large windows lined the walls, giving the room a bright and open feel. For now, it was nighttime, so there wasn't much to see outside, but in the daylight, the windows would no doubt offer an impressive view of the vast blue sea.

As they ventured further inside, Kwon Taekjoo noticed a dining table large enough to comfortably seat ten people. The chandelier hanging from the ceiling swayed with the yacht's slightest movement, casting a dazzling array of crystal and metal reflections that nearly blinded him. Shaking his head, Kwon Taekjoo moved forward, searching for the bedroom.

He had expected to reach the bedroom by now, but instead, they found themselves in a large chamber. One side led to a staircase, while the other opened onto an outdoor terrace. Kwon Taekjoo looked at Zhenya in disbelief, but Zhenya merely shrugged and raised his eyebrows.

They headed up the staircase and finally reached the bedroom. When Kwon Taekjoo stepped onto the last stair, a large window greeted him, along with a bed so enormous that even Zhenya could lie comfortably in it with room to spare. Kwon Taekjoo was speechless.

The mattress, soft and plush, looked like a cloud of white cotton candy. Kwon Taekjoo's tired, worn-out body ached at the sight of it, drawn to the sweet temptation before him. If it hadn't been someone else's bed, he might have been tempted to dive right in.

Kwon Taekjoo barely managed to locate the bathroom and veered off toward it. The previous living area already had a large bathroom, but the one in front of him now was incomparably bigger. The ceiling, floor, walls, sink, and even the bathtub were made of pure marble. Warm, aromatic water shimmered in the spacious circular tub. Next to it, a minibar offered drinks or water, and a door led to a private terrace. Kwon Taekjoo couldn't help but feel a pang of discomfort as he wondered what price Zhenya had paid for such luxury.

"Hey..."

Kwon Taekjoo turned to Zhenya with an uncertain look, but Zhenya grabbed him roughly by the chin. His hand slid down Kwon Taekjoo's neck, across his shoulders, and down his arms before finally resting on his hands. He spread his fingers over Kwon Taekjoo's palm, carefully inspecting each of his ten fingers as if checking to make sure they were all still there. Kwon Taekjoo was already familiar with this routine, so he let Zhenya touch him while pressing on with the question that had been gnawing at his mind.

"Are you sure the owner of this yacht is someone we can trust?"

"Hmm. 'Someone we can trust'... who, exactly, would you consider trustworthy?"

“It’s impossible that you convinced him with loyalty or goodwill. The owner must have had something to gain by helping us.”

Zhenya smirked at Kwon Taekjoo’s comment, amused by the suggestion that it was impossible for him to have made a “trustworthy” friend or ally. He even nodded in agreement.

“We made a deal. They were quite satisfied with what I offered them. As for whether I’ll be happy with what I got in return, only time will tell,” Zhenya said, crouching down to thoroughly examine Kwon Taekjoo’s legs.

So Zhenya had struck some kind of deal with the yacht owner in exchange for ensuring Kwon Taekjoo’s safety? Watching Zhenya smile as he hinted that he was still evaluating Kwon Taekjoo’s worth was infuriating. Annoyed, Kwon Taekjoo yanked his leg out of Zhenya’s grasp.

“Isn’t it risky to trust him so easily? He might be helping us now, but there’s no guarantee he won’t turn on us when given the chance. If he’s willing to betray his own country for personal gain, what’s to stop him from betraying us for a better deal?”

“Merchants naturally don’t trust each other. They simply covet what the other has. Their greed is stronger than any kind of loyalty you’ll find out there.”

“So what, are you implying that you’re as much of a traitor as he is?”

“I’m just pointing out that not everyone shares your naive patriotism.”

“What did you say, you bastard?”

“There you go again, getting all worked up. Did I say something wrong? If you had died fighting so valiantly out there tonight, your country wouldn’t have even blinked. And your fellow countrymen? They don’t even know you exist,” Zhenya said bluntly, staring directly at Kwon Taekjoo.

Then he crouched down and gently took hold of Kwon Taekjoo’s leg, carefully examining his swollen ankle. He even checked his shin, knee, and hip.

“Don’t worry, Taekjoo. I don’t make deals that end in a loss.”

A sharp pain flared from his wounds under Zhenya’s persistent touch. When Zhenya pressed on a small cut, Kwon Taekjoo flinched reflexively. Zhenya’s gaze locked onto Kwon Taekjoo, his hands freezing mid-motion as he watched his face. Kwon Taekjoo felt an unexpected flutter in his stomach, seeing how gentle Zhenya was being with him, fully aware that he was more than capable of tearing someone apart if he felt like it.

“Enough. I’m not that hurt.”

“Well, it’s clear you don’t have any broken bones, though you’ll definitely need a few stitches here and there.”

Zhenya nodded and stood up slowly, bringing his face right in front of Kwon Taekjoo's. Kwon Taekjoo could see his own stunned expression reflected in Zhenya's pale blue eyes. Warm breath brushed against his lips. Was Zhenya going to kiss him? Just as Kwon Taekjoo was about to hold his breath, Zhenya noticed his expression and smiled, satisfied.

"Go wash up. You're filthy."

The fact that those words came from someone who had just seduced him with that pretty face a moment ago made Kwon Taekjoo feel like the target of a cruel joke. In a burst of indignation, he pinched Zhenya's cheek. Zhenya raised his eyebrows as if surprised, but Kwon Taekjoo shot him a disapproving glare and grabbed him by the back of the neck, pulling him in for a kiss.

His tongue ran across the dry surface of Zhenya's lips before slipping inside, capturing Zhenya's tongue. His movements were desperate and rough, as if trying to quench a deep thirst. Kwon Taekjoo didn't stop moving his tongue against Zhenya's, not even letting him adjust to the rhythm. Every time Zhenya tried to match his movements, Kwon Taekjoo would pull away and suck on his upper lip. Zhenya would then try to bite his lower lip in response, but Kwon Taekjoo stubbornly plunged his tongue back inside.

Under the full-body assault from Kwon Taekjoo, Zhenya slowly retreated until he was forced to sit on a bench next to the bed. Kwon Taekjoo straddled him and resumed their heated kiss with unwavering determination. Kwon Taekjoo's relentless lips drained Zhenya of every last breath, leaving his chin and upper lip numb. Their kiss carried the sweet taste of saliva mixed with a faint trace of blood.

After what felt like a long time, their lips finally parted with a soft, wet sound. The only thing filling their ears was the sound of their ragged breathing.

"Haa... Taekjoo."

Zhenya's chest rose and fell heavily, his eyes and lips flushed red. Small droplets clung to his long eyelashes, trembling as they blinked. Kwon Taekjoo remained perched on top of him, supporting himself with one arm as he looked down at him. Suddenly, Kwon Taekjoo flashed a smile. It was the triumphant smile of a winner.

"What are you going to do now? You're just as filthy as I am."

"Hah?"

The corner of Zhenya's lips curved upward as he cast Kwon Taekjoo a look of surprise. Still, his intense gaze swept over Kwon Taekjoo's features, as if waiting for something more.

Kwon Taekjoo stroked the edge of Zhenya's ear and leaned in for another kiss. This time, it was a gentle kiss, clearly different from the previous one. He pressed his lips against Zhenya's before softly nibbling on his upper lip. The warmth of Zhenya's breath mixing with his own, their tongues brushing against each other, felt intimately soft and tender. The tiny hairs on Zhenya's cheeks stood on end in response.

Only then did Kwon Taekjoo gradually pull away from him. At the same time, a ragged breath escaped Zhenya, his damp lashes fluttering.

“Wait here. I’ll take a bath and come back.”

With a light pat on Zhenya’s flushed cheek, Kwon Taekjoo stood up and headed toward the bathroom. However, he had barely taken a few steps when he felt a strong tug on his hair. In the next moment, before he could even turn around, Zhenya had pulled him back into an embrace, and they both collapsed to the floor under their own weight.

“Uugh, damn it, that hurts!”

“Taekjoo, you always tease me. Were you that impatient?”

“Talk about the pot calling the kettle black. Ugh, let go of me. I can’t breathe.”

Kwon Taekjoo struck Zhenya’s arm with all his strength, but it was useless. Zhenya only tightened his grip. Thanks to his unprecedented display of brute strength, it was becoming harder and harder for Kwon Taekjoo to even breathe. He tried to wriggle free from Zhenya’s arms, but his efforts were crushed as Zhenya’s full weight pressed down on him.

“Taekjoo, Taekjoo...”

Zhenya buried his face in Kwon Taekjoo’s hair, calling his name over and over again. Kwon Taekjoo could feel his hot breath against his scalp and neck. A hard, unmistakable bulge persistently dug into his hip. It was surprising how a simple kiss had reduced Zhenya’s usually arrogant behavior to this. A sigh escaped Kwon Taekjoo.

“Hey, hold on a second! Ugh, just wait. Is this really the right time for this? Listen to me, you idiot!”

“‘The right time’? Please. Humans are creatures that have sex even in times of war. It’s part of our instinct.”

Kwon Taekjoo tried to resist, but Zhenya pinned him down, giving his chest a firm squeeze while biting his neck. Kwon Taekjoo gritted his teeth as a sharp pain shot through him, while Zhenya impatiently twisted both of Kwon Taekjoo’s nipples through his thick military uniform and sucked on the back of his neck. When Kwon Taekjoo turned his head away, Zhenya bit his ear instead, unfazed. Kwon Taekjoo struggled for a while before finally managing to push Zhenya off with his elbow.

“Seriously, what the hell? Are you an animal?”

“You’re the one who pushed me over the edge, so you should take responsibility instead of backing out.”

“We can do it later, just not here. I don’t want to do it while I’m still dirty.”

“Oh, so you wanted to do it in the helicopter? Or maybe try it in a lifeboat?”

“Don’t get smart with me.”

“Why don’t you stop complaining and relax for a bit? While we’re here, neither Cuba nor Mexico can touch us,” Zhenya said, quickly addressing the source of Kwon Taekjoo’s anxiety.

But the more Zhenya spoke, the deeper Kwon Taekjoo’s suspicions grew. What kind of man owned such an extravagant yacht and had the power to protect them from both Cuba and Mexico? And what had Zhenya offered in return? Was it something that could potentially leave Zhenya vulnerable?

As Kwon Taekjoo remained silent, Zhenya turned him over by the shoulder. Kwon Taekjoo looked at him with wary eyes.

“What? Are you still worried?”

“.....”

“You still don’t believe me?”

Kwon Taekjoo didn’t respond. He just stared at Zhenya with a conflicted look.

“Then trust me.”

Kwon Taekjoo’s eyes widened slightly at those words. Zhenya looked at him with piercing intensity, a daring smile playing on his lips. His blue eyes, reflecting Kwon Taekjoo’s face, were filled with confidence.

“Bet everything on me, Taekjoo. I’ll destroy all your worries completely.”

How ironic for him to say that, considering he was the very source of Kwon Taekjoo’s worries. Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t help but laugh at Zhenya’s bold and absurd statement. Suddenly, Zhenya’s face drew closer to his. Their lips intertwined as Zhenya’s rough breath seeped into Kwon Taekjoo’s mouth.

Kwon Taekjoo was in trouble. His heart had softened the moment he heard Zhenya recklessly tell him to trust him. There was no logical reason for it... no possible justification. And it was all because he felt secure knowing Zhenya was on his side. He knew he couldn’t afford to rely too much on Zhenya, but when it came to him, Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t help but be swept away, unable to stand on his own.

With a frustrated sigh, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed the back of Zhenya’s neck, tilting his head to draw Zhenya’s desperate tongue deeper into his mouth.

“Haa, haa...”

The remains of Kwon Taekjoo's mangled military equipment lay strewn across the bathroom floor. Kwon Taekjoo leaned against the wall under the shower head with heaving breaths, his chest rising and falling under the pressure of his harness. The undershirt that clung to his

body was already rolled up to the level of his neck. His nipples, which had been nibbled and sucked, glistened with a wet trail of saliva. His half-ripped briefs stretched against the holster on his leg, clinging desperately to the side of his thigh. Zhenya's eyes lifted with satisfaction at the sight of Kwon Taekjoo totally disheveled.

Zhenya gazed intently at Kwon Taekjoo's flushed face and set to work diligently to stretch his hole. Thanks to Zhenya having squeezed a whole bottle of body oil inside him, his entire hole and the floor were slippery. Kwon Taekjoo pushed his elbows back and could barely support his body.

"Mm, ugh, mmn..."

Another long finger pushed through. Kwon Taekjoo squeezed his eyes tightly shut at the sensation of Zhenya's fingers stretching his walls and opening him deeper. Despite having fucked Zhenya countless times, for some reason he could never quite get used to the feeling. Numerous wounds, large and small, covered his body, but he had no chance to feel the pain. Every cell in his body was uniquely attuned to the constant pleasure coming from below. As Zhenya continued to stimulate him, Kwon Taekjoo's impatience increased. Every second and every minute dragged on for what felt like an eternity.

Zhenya dragged his fingers against Kwon Taekjoo's inner walls one last time before pulling them out, causing Kwon Taekjoo's fully opened knees to tremble. When Zhenya slipped his fingers back in and focused on his sweet spot, Kwon Taekjoo gritted his teeth and held his breath, his thighs tightening from the arousal. His cock rose, dripping at the tip. Zhenya smirked as he watched Kwon Taekjoo's reactions.

"Taekjoo. Every time I touch you here, you collapse in my arms."

"Shit... stop teasing me and just put it in me already."

"You see, I really want to live up to your expectations and I know you like it rough, but don't you think it's still a little early?"

"Haa, when have you ever.... Nngh, cared about that?"

"Why do something that would make you hate me?"

Kwon Taekjoo reached out to pull Zhenya's head closer, pressing their foreheads together tightly. He stared into Zhenya's wide eyes and growled, *"Fuck me, now."*

"... Uh?"

Zhenya's expression changed to one of disbelief, as if someone had just hit him. Then a smile broke out on his face and, for an instant, his blue eyes seemed to glow. He withdrew the fingers that had been tightly enclosed in Kwon Taekjoo's hole and, instead, pressed something heavy and warm against it.

"Oh, is this what I had to do to earn your compliments?".

Zhenya smiled in satisfaction and pushed his cock in. Kwon Taekjoo's tender, wet hole stretched to its limit as it slowly swallowed the shaft. His trembling inner walls convulsed at the intense pressure. The corners of Zhenya's lips curled as he slowly pushed inside Kwon Taekjoo, his cock twitching violently as he tasted the soft warmth enveloping him. Meanwhile, Kwon Taekjoo's hands clung to the back of Zhenya's neck and arm, tensing with each movement.

Not long after, Zhenya's hips pressed down on Kwon Taekjoo's balls with a hard slap. At the same time, a thick vein bulged in Zhenya's smooth forehead. His pupils contracted, and the hairs on his cheeks bristled.

"Haa... Taekjoo."

"Ugh, uhn..."

As usual, Zhenya buried his face in Kwon Taekjoo's hair, rubbing his nose against the jet-black locks as he peppered him with kisses. His cock tingled with pleasure as he felt the tightness of Kwon Taekjoo's inner walls. Kwon Taekjoo felt as if his belly and abs were being pushed and stretched in all directions.

There was no clear boundary between disgust and euphoria, nor between pain and pleasure. Even though Kwon Taekjoo felt full, with his guts stretched and pushed to the limit, he was still hungry for more. Oddly enough, he wanted to escape the choking oppression and, at the same time, he wanted Zhenya to fuck him so hard he lost any coherent thought.

"Agh... Zhenya. Faster..."

"Of course, Taekjoo. Anytime you want," Zhenya whispered, his voice heavy with desire. The next moment, Zhenya's cock slid out of him only to thrust violently back in again and again.

"Ugh, Ngh...! Nmm... I... Ahh!"

"Ahh, Taekjoo.... Taekjoo..."

Zhenya's groin repeatedly slapped the delicate skin over Kwon Taekjoo's hole with each deep thrust, sending waves of tingling pleasure spreading outward. Kwon Taekjoo's hips trembled under the intense burn building up between them. Zhenya continued to pound mercilessly into him, as if trying to engrave the shape of his cock into Kwon Taekjoo's inner walls before he could pull himself together.

The bathroom echoed with the sound of wet slaps, making a noise that could easily be mistaken for a violent fist fight. Kwon Taekjoo's ears and head were almost numb from the constant stimulation.

That was when the back of Kwon Taekjoo's neck and lower spine became cold before a sudden warmth from below shot up through his body. The intense pressure and pain of Zhenya's penetration began to melt into a sweet, intoxicating mix of sensations. Kwon Taekjoo struggled to take more pleasure from Zhenya's cock, despite the fact that he kept

being thrashed around and pinned down by Zhenya's huge body. His moans were escaping uncontrollably, unable to be restrained.

“Mmm, ugh, Zhen.... haa, ahh... I, ahh!”

“ Taekjoo... do you like it like this? Haa... do you like it, Taekjoo?”

“Ahh, there, ah.... ahh! Ugh!”

“Ugh... Here? You want it here? Mm, like this?”

“Haa! Ahh! Ugh, shit, shit...!”

Kwon Taekjoo let out loud moans, spurring Zhenya to fuck him even faster. Kwon Taekjoo's inner walls grew hotter as the uneven surface of Zhenya's cock pressed against them. The intoxicating aroma of warm body oil thickened the air. Kwon Taekjoo couldn't discern whether his fuzzy mind was due to the intoxicating scent or the intense heat rising from inside him.

The back of his thighs, which had been intensely rubbed, were red, burning, and sore. When Kwon Taekjoo reached out to try to stop him, Zhenya grabbed his arm and pressed it against the wall. Then, he pressed the lower half of his body even closer to Kwon Taekjoo, crushing him.

"Ah, wait, ugh, just a moment, ah, hah!"

"Taekjoo... Ha, Taekjoo..."

Each time Kwon Taekjoo tried to pull back from the fierce stimulation, Zhenya pushed even harder, breaking through any resistance, as if commanding him to surrender.

"Ah, mm, hah!"

In the midst of the frantic rush, Kwon Taekjoo slipped on the body oil. Instinctively, he tightly wrapped his arms around Zhenya's neck. Then, as if it were a lie, Zhenya’s movements came to an abrupt stop. The hole, which had been passively receiving Zhenya's cock before, tightened around the hot flesh it held.

“Ha, ha... mm...”

“Haaa...”

For an instant, their gazes met. They were both so aroused they looked ready to bite each other's necks at any moment. Their breaths were rough and hot.

Kwon Taekjoo looked at Zhenya with intensity as he slowly twisted his body, crushing it. The shaft, which was half inside his hole, began to be engulfed deeper. Right after the reddened member was completely swallowed, Kwon Taekjoo's abdominal muscles suddenly tightened. At that, his inner walls clenched tightly, squeezing Zhenya's cock mercilessly.

“Haa, ugh...mm.... Taekjoo, not bad...”

Zhenya's brow furrowed at the unexpected, agonizing pleasure. The corners of his eyes, his ears, and even his neck turned bright red. The corners of his mouth quirked upward, and his cheeks tingled. Even his large body trembled slightly at the sensation. Kwon Taekjoo smirked as he watched the change with amusement.

“You love it, don’t you, kid.”

“What?”

Zhenya twisted his lips into a smirk as he looked at Kwon Taekjoo. His blue eyes, filled with a deep ecstasy, stared at him. He chuckled repeatedly, as if stunned by the unexpected counterattack.

“Where on earth did you learn to play like this? Do they teach this to men in your country?”

“Teach? Only rookies need to learn stuff like this.”

“Ah, so you were born with it?”

“I’ve always been great at improvising.”

Kwon Taekjoo smiled broadly as he wiggled his hips. The cock, which was firmly trapped inside him, was slowly sucked in and then pulled out, reddened by the friction. As it was engulfed, the soft mucous membranes firmly surrounded the surface of the shaft, applying a warm pressure; and as it was pulled out, the tight hole squeezed it as if it was about to cut it off. The intense sensation caused thick veins to appear, not only on the cock but also on Zhenya’s lower abdomen.

"Haa, ugh, mm... Taekjoo, mm... a little more…."

Zhenya accepted the sweet pleasure Kwon Taekjoo was offering. Seeing him enjoy the sensation, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't help but smile slightly. He drew Zhenya’s now beautifully flushed face closer and whispered in his ear in a deep voice, brushing his lips against the cold earlobe.

"Zhenya, do you like it?"

Suddenly, Zhenya’s breathing, once steady, grew quiet. For a moment, it seemed as though his back expanded with a deep breath. Kwon Taekjoo clearly felt Zhenya's cheek tighten as he clenched his teeth. Smirking, Kwon Taekjoo squeezed his abdomen, firmly pressing Zhenya's member inside him and gently crushing his own abdomen against Zhenya's.

“Haa, ugh... Your cock, it doesn't know what to do in here, huh? It's twitching so much that everything in here is throbbing.”

“Huh?”

Zhenya laughed in disbelief. As he murmured "Taekjoo," almost as if complaining, he began to rub his head against Kwon Taekjoo's shoulder. Then, Zhenya supported Kwon Taekjoo's bent waist and slowly licked from his neck to the back of his ear. Although he acted like a playful dog, his nature wasn't easily tamed. And this time was no different.

"You're squeezing so much inside and out that I should naturally match those expectations."

The peculiar rough voice foreshadowed the upcoming storm. Next, Zhenya's cock, which had been firmly trapped inside, was yanked out. No matter how hard he squeezed, it was no use. The shaft slipped out almost completely, leaving only the head inside, all the while rubbing gently against the entrance, creating an unsettling tension, only to be slammed in with such force that a dry sound echoed, sending a shiver from Kwon Taekjoo's pelvis up his spine.

"Ah! Damn bast..."

The deeply scratched mucous membranes awkwardly tried to get involved around the shaft. However, Zhenya immediately pulled back only to bury himself back to the root.

"Haa! Ah… Fu-Fucker..."

Kwon Taekjoo let out a groan that was almost a scream. His fingers, in response to the stabbing pain, dug firmly into Zhenya's shoulders and back. But Zhenya paid no mind and continued with rapid and deep hip movements, as if punishing the earlier teasing, keeping his gaze fixed on Kwon Taekjoo as he repeatedly rammed him to his core.

"Ugh! Ah, uh... This damned...! Slow down.... Ah, ah!"

"Haa, there you go, baring your teeth again. You asked for it, Taekjoo."

I didn't? And suddenly, he changed the angle of his thrusting, crushing one side of his inner wall. In that moment, Kwon Taekjoo clamped his mouth tightly. His jaw tightened, and his rigid spine began to tremble uncontrollably.

Zhenya's lips curved into a silent smile. Right after, he slowly withdrew his cock and thrust it back into that exact spot, eliciting a scream from Kwon Taekjoo as his body collapsed. Without missing a chance, Zhenya continued to ram relentlessly, concentrating obsessively on that spot. The constant pounding, crushing and squeezing deep inside him, sent electric currents all the way to his brain, wrenching out moans of frustration one after another.

"Ah! Ugh, ah...! Ugh, ah, uh..."

"Biting so hard with intention, huh? Is that it?"

The pleasure, almost painful, poured over like a waterfall. Every sense in his body sharpened, to the point where even the touch of a single hair was clearly felt. Zhenya's burning cock seemed determined to force its way into his belly. Some of the mangled skin inside him clung to the shaft that was thrusting out forcefully, only to be quickly pushed back in.

Zhenya licked Kwon Taekjoo's lips, forcing them open. Although Kwon Taekjoo bit his tongue down as soon as Zhenya went inside, he ignored it as if he was used to it. The tongues

aggressively intertwined, and a subtle taste of blood appeared, only to be quickly neutralized by the dense saliva that had been accumulating. Each time Zhenya's cock pierced and prodded Taekjoo's most sensitive inner flesh, Kwon Taekjoo's tongue reacted instinctively, causing the corners of Zhenya's lips to rise steadily.

"Uugh, ugh, uh, hngh, ugh, hngh, hngh, uugh!"

Even while his lips were sealed, the rhythm of Zhenya's cock thrusting in and out did not slow down in the slightest. The pounding from tip to base, penetrating deep in a single thrust, remained constant. Now, every time he pierced through that spot that became more sensitive with the slightest friction, Kwon Taekjoo would exhale in despair.

"Stop! Haah, haah!"

Kwon Taekjoo unleashed his survival instinct and lifted Zhenya's chin. Only then could he exhale the breath he had been holding back. His chest ached from the tension he had been suppressing. Yet, Zhenya continued to explore below. His pupils, now dilated, showed that he was no longer in his right mind. It seemed like he would have to pull him out of this state first.

He buried his head into Zhenya's neck as, with effort, he squeezed his hole. Then he bit down hard on his skin and pulled back as he sucked. Kwon Taekjoo didn't know if it was his imagination, but Zhenya's Adam's apple seemed to throb visibly.

Right after that, Zhenya's two arms squeezed Kwon Taekjoo as if he wanted to crush him. Then, his cock jerked explosively inside his hole. Kwon Taekjoo felt that he might tear himself apart at any moment, but he was trapped, unable to move. He could only endure the intense, clingy lust that Zhenya was pouring over him.

"Ha... Ugh... Ha, Ah... Ugh, Zhe... Zhenya... Ugh! Ha... Ugh..."

"Ha... Ugh... Taekjoo, Taek..."

Zhenya had been violently thrusting inside him when he suddenly slammed into Kwon Taekjoo for the last time with a wet slap. At the same time, Zhenya's cock squirmed uncontrollably inside Kwon Taekjoo, releasing another kind of heat. Zhenya pushed himself against the floor, pressing Kwon Taekjoo even tighter against the corner, until their bodies, now entwined, pressed even tighter together. With ragged breath, Zhenya growled against Kwon Taekjoo's neck.

Zhenya let out a long, raspy exhale, as he momentarily stilled, before ramming into Kwon Taekjoo one last time. His cock twitched before releasing a white stream of fluid. Kwon Taekjoo's inner walls, warm from the constant friction, were coated with Zhenya's semen and continued to tremble in the lingering agony of pleasure.

"Haa, haa... Taekjoo."

"Ahhh...."

Zhenya continued to whisper Kwon Taekjoo's name while sinking his face into Taekjoo's hair. Even though Kwon Taekjoo's whole body was slick with sweat, Zhenya showered him with kisses, undeterred. Too exhausted to resist, Kwon Taekjoo remained in his embrace and moaned, *"Shit.... How come I get fucked harder by you than anything else on my missions?"*.

"That's too much complaining for someone who just came so hard. Look, your cum is really sticky. You must have been very restrained,".

Zhenya collected Kwon Taekjoo's semen from between his clothes and held it up, stretching the milky strands between his fingers. Kwon Taekjoo slapped his hand away.

"Stop it, you bastard."

Kwon Taekjoo couldn't understand what was so funny to Zhenya while he was clearly disgusted. He clicked his tongue in disapproval, searching for something to drink in the room. His throat had been dry when he entered the bathroom, but now it felt completely parched. He could have sworn he had seen a bottle of water somewhere.

Finally, he spotted the bottle on the sink. Kwon Taekjoo reached desperately for it, but it was useless since he was immobilized by Zhenya's embrace. He gave Zhenya a light tap on the shoulder.

"Hey, let me go. I'm thirsty and I need to shower."

"Alright," Zhenya replied, nodding obediently, but he made no move to release Kwon Taekjoo. Instead, he intertwined his hands and raised them, pinning Kwon Taekjoo against the wall.

"What now?" Kwon Taekjoo began to complain, but Zhenya silenced him with a kiss. His tongue invaded Kwon Taekjoo's mouth before he could even react. Was Zhenya trying to quench Kwon Taekjoo's thirst with a kiss? Surely he wasn't jealous of the water bottle... Maybe he just didn't want to let go of Kwon Taekjoo for even a moment. Kwon Taekjoo couldn't understand Zhenya's intentions, but if this was his way of getting back at Kwon Taekjoo for going to work during their vacation, there was no reason to refuse. It was almost endearing to see such a big man acting like a spoiled child, so he accepted Zhenya's affection and started to suck on his tongue. But instead of relieving his thirst, his throat only grew drier.

Kwon Taekjoo jolted when his breathing became labored. He tried to tell Zhenya to stop, but Zhenya quieted him by pressing his tongue firmly against his. Zhenya's hands slid down Kwon Taekjoo's wrists, intertwining their fingers through Kwon Taekjoo's clenched fists. As Kwon Taekjoo's right hand moved up, his fingertips brushed against something... a long faucet shaped like a bar. The rush of water that began to flow confirmed its presence.

Kwon Taekjoo barely managed to pull his mouth away from Zhenya's, gasping, *"Nngh, aahh aah, what are you...!"* before he was left speechless. Zhenya stood there, soaked, droplets forming on his nose and chin, dripping onto Kwon Taekjoo's face. Each of Zhenya's pale eyelashes held drops that splashed against Kwon Taekjoo's cheeks. The moment unfolded

slowly before him. The blue eyes watching him sparkled brighter than ever. Unable to hold back, Kwon Taekjoo burst into laughter.

“Clever little bastard... You rely on your looks to save you, don’t you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Zhenya said with a cheerful smile, feigning innocence.

Kwon Taekjoo stood firm against Zhenya’s provocation, slowly opening his mouth and sticking out his tongue. The sweet water made it slippery. He licked the curve of his lower lip with his wet tongue, locking his gaze on Zhenya, who was intensely focused on him. Zhenya’s lips hovered at the edge of his vision, and his eyelashes fluttered softly. Kwon Taekjoo was still thirsty.

Subtly, Kwon Taekjoo tilted his head back to catch the droplets of water from Zhenya’s chin, his tongue tracing a path upward from Zhenya’s throat to his ear, where he gave a gentle bite. But it wasn’t enough to truly quench his dry throat. Although Kwon Taekjoo knew this would only intensify his thirst, he couldn’t bring himself to stop.

The streams of water flowing through Zhenya’s ivory hair and slick face mingled and separated around the protrusion of his throat. For some reason, Kwon Taekjoo thought it would be a shame to just watch it happen. He gently bit Zhenya’s collarbone and sucked, eliciting a low moan from Zhenya’s throat and causing his brow to furrow in response.

Kwon Taekjoo pulled away with a wet sound. In a hoarse voice, he commanded, *“...Yevgeny. Let go of my hands now.”*

Amazingly, Zhenya released Kwon Taekjoo’s wrists. Kwon Taekjoo used his free arms to pull Zhenya closer by the neck. As if anticipating the movement, Zhenya lifted him, and Kwon Taekjoo’s legs wrapped tightly around him.

The two kissed each other with intensity, on the forehead, cheeks, lips and ears. Meanwhile, Zhenya's cock pressed against Kwon Taekjoo's crotch, rubbing against his member. The steady streams of water falling from above served as a lubricant, making their bodies slippery and intensifying the arousal that had once again flared up between them.

Zhenya was quick to press his hard erection against Kwon Taekjoo's ass. But he made no move to enter him. Instead, he licked Kwon Taekjoo's cheek and casually led him into a kiss, waiting for him to melt in his arms.

Kwon Taekjoo, at first stiff due to his position, gradually began to relax. His tongue, entangled with Zhenya's, became more and more slippery and soft. Although Zhenya's cock had only brushed against his entrance before, Kwon Taekjoo now felt Zhenya's glans pushing inside him.

Zhenya moaned, *“Taekjoo,”* before thrusting his cock into Kwon Taekjoo's softened hole. Kwon Taekjoo, initially relaxed in Zhenya's embrace, suddenly let out a high-pitched moan, instinctively clinging to Zhenya.

“Agh...Nnn.... slowly...”

“Of course, whatever you want.”

Zhenya effortlessly lifted Kwon Taekjoo's body, tightening it against him, and began to fuck into his inner walls. The shower continued to run for a long time, filling the bathroom with its persistent sound.

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Chapter End Notes

Support the author by purchasing the novel on Ridibooks.

Reboot

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•SPANISH DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Once they had finished showering, Kwon Taekjoo collapsed onto the bed, his body completely limp. It was hard to even move a finger. Kwon Taekjoo didn't have the strength to check the time or think about the situation in Cuba. His mind was foggy, teetering on the edge of unconsciousness.

Zhenya approached the bed. Part of the mattress sank under his weight. With his eyes fixed on Kwon Taekjoo, he gently lifted one of Kwon Taekjoo's arms, placed a hand under his head, and positioned him so his head rested against the headboard. Kwon Taekjoo wondered if it was wise to let him move his body at will. A small part of his reasoning protested, but Kwon Taekjoo thought, "What's the point? He's my boyfriend anyway." It was strange to think that his life had once been in Zhenya's hands, but now, instead of feeling suspicious, he found comfort and peace in his touch.

"...Mmm."

The back of Kwon Taekjoo's head sank into the soft pillow. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a pale hand reaching for his face. Realizing Zhenya was trying to touch him, he instinctively leaned his face toward the hand. As soon as they made contact, Kwon Taekjoo shuddered at the unexpected sensation and opened his eyes to see whiskey sloshing inside a glass in front of him.

Kwon Taekjoo opened his mouth but quickly closed it, realizing his voice was completely gone. He coughed a few times to get it back before trying again.

"Hey. I told you I was thirsty. How could you...?"

“Taekjoo, I know you like pain, but there’s really no need to endure unnecessary discomfort.”

“What are you talking about?”

Kwon Taekjoo frowned and shifted his body before stopping. A quiet, sharp pain spread throughout his body, which felt as heavy as a waterlogged piece of cotton. He suspected the discomfort wasn’t just from having sex with Zhenya.

Lifting his head, Kwon Taekjoo looked down at himself. Thanks to the brief shower, his skin seemed relatively clean, though it was covered with an array of large and small bandages. Even the smallest cuts and scratches gleamed, probably covered with some kind of ointment. Kwon Taekjoo knew he had several deep cuts that required stitches. He wondered if Zhenya had stitched them all by hand.

Kwon Taekjoo carefully peeled back the bandage on his arm. The wound, as thin as a fingernail, was perfectly sealed, with stitches so evenly sized that Kwon Taekjoo might have believed Zhenya if he had claimed he had experience sewing. A small laugh escaped him at the absurdity of the thought.

“Why did you bother stitching these up? You got off on touching my bare skin again, didn't you?”.

Zhenya tilted his pale face and offered a ridiculous response.

“Of course not. It’s the small cuts that tend to leave the most lasting scars. Don’t you think you already have enough marks on you, thanks to me?”

Kwon Taekjoo wondered if he had finally gone insane, because Zhenya’s ridiculous statement sounded strangely romantic to his ears. Clearly, something was wrong with his head after the explosion. Either that, or his emotions had spiraled completely out of control.

As Kwon Taekjoo struggled to sit up, he pondered the silly question of whether madness could be contagious, letting out an involuntary groan from the effort. In response, Zhenya gently waved a glass in front of him.

“Drink this. I gave you some painkillers, but they’ll wear off soon.”

Kwon Taekjoo gladly accepted the glass from Zhenya and quenched his thirst, feeling his parched insides finally start to hydrate. A burning sensation spread from his esophagus to his stomach, but Kwon Taekjoo ignored it and took another sip, finding the scent of the liquor pleasant. By the way, how expensive was the drink? Considering Zhenya was the kind of person who would casually drink wine worth as much as an entire house, anyone could guess the price. He finished the drink quickly and handed the empty glass back to Zhenya.

“Do you want another glass?”

“...No, thanks.”

Kwon Taekjoo seemed to be relieved of any major pain, thanks to Zhenya’s attentive care. It wasn’t surprising, given that he had taken painkillers, was utterly exhausted, and had drunk

alcohol. The problem was that the stiffness in his hips and the odd lingering sensation inside his ass were still as clear as day.

Had Zhenya ruthlessly pounded him again last night? Kwon Taekjoo had blacked out halfway through the encounter, so it was impossible to know how long they had gone at it. Of course, there was no better indicator than the state of his own body. It was so typical of Zhenya to push him to his limits every time he felt like having sex.

“Haaa… even though I try to overlook it all and adore you, I just can’t.”

“What are you saying? Speak in Russian.”

Or maybe you could learn Korean. Are you trying to stop me from talking to myself now? Kwon Taekjoo thought.

Annoyed, Kwon Taekjoo snapped back, *“Are you horny 365 days a year? I barely came back alive. How could you do that to me all night?”*

“What are you talking about? If you’re referring to our late-night session, you were the one who started it. I distinctly remember telling you to go wash up,” Zhenya retorted stubbornly, as if he wouldn’t have had sex if Kwon Taekjoo had just followed his request.

Realizing it was pointless to argue with him, Kwon Taekjoo shook his head and examined his own body. His skin was a patchwork of wounds and kiss marks. Even the bruises he had suffered earlier had been replaced by hickeys. Was this what Zhenya meant when he said Kwon Taekjoo already had enough marks thanks to him? Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t help but let out a sigh.

“You went overboard with the biting. People might mistake you for a zombie.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Cannibalism isn’t really my thing.”

“Well, good for you.”

“Ah, now that I think about it, I forgot this spot.”

Zhenya’s words made no sense to Kwon Taekjoo as Zhenya reached for the ointment on the nearby desk. He unscrewed the lid, put some on his hand, and rubbed it all over Kwon Taekjoo’s nipple. The poor lump of flesh had already been nibbled and sucked by Zhenya all night and now trembled easily under his touch. Kwon Taekjoo flinched at the delicate sensation.

“Ugh, stop it, you idiot.”

“What? Now you’re embarrassed?”

“No, I’m disgusted by your nonsense. When are you going to stop acting like a little kid?”

“I’m a little kid?”

“Well, how else would you explain your fixation on my chest?”

“Even if it’s true, it’s not like I need to fix it. You like it too.”

Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taekjoo’s left pec and gave it a squeeze. Leaning in close, he whispered playfully, *“Last night, you even came once just from me playing with your chest.”*

The sharp edge of Zhenya’s nose brushed against Kwon Taekjoo’s ear and neck. But just as Zhenya was about to bite Kwon Taekjoo’s neck, he was stopped by Kwon Taekjoo’s hand.

“Knock it off.”

“Knock what off?”

“I’m not falling for your tricks again.”

“What are you talking about?”

Zhenya gave him a confused look, as if he truly didn’t understand. Since he had gone through the trouble of cleaning Kwon Taekjoo’s body and dressing him in fresh clothes after he’d passed out, Kwon Taekjoo’s comment was more than a little irritating.

“You can use your pretty face all you want, but it won’t work on me. I’m immune.”

After a moment, Zhenya responded, *“...Oh? You think I’m pretty?”* he said, laughing. Mockingly, he added, *“Admit it. I was definitely your type from the start, wasn’t I?”*

Kwon Taekjoo clenched his fists, resisting the urge to smack the cocky bastard in front of him.

He forced himself to unclench his fists and extended a hand toward Zhenya.

“Stop with the nonsense and hand me your phone.”

Zhenya tilted his head at Kwon Taekjoo’s unheard-of request. The last remnants of his playful attitude disappeared.

“My phone? Why?”

“My transmitter was destroyed, so I have no way of contacting headquarters. I also lost my phone and my gun in the revolt.”

“So what?”

“What do you mean, ‘so what’? I still need to file my report, you know that.”

“Even now, all you can think about is work.”

“Yes, and I’m just trying to finish the aforementioned work. Come on,” Kwon Taekjoo insisted, motioning with his hand.

Reluctantly, Zhenya handed over his phone, an unmistakable look of disapproval in his eyes. It would've been helpful if Zhenya had unlocked it first, but of course, foresight wasn't one of his strong suits. With a sigh, Kwon Taekjoo held the phone up and brought the screen close to Zhenya's face. For a moment, Zhenya's real face seemed more dreamlike than his reflection on the screen. Kwon Taekjoo found himself staring at him long after the facial recognition program had activated.

Maybe Zhenya noticed the intense look Kwon Taekjoo was giving him because suddenly, he leaned in closer. Their noses brushed lightly before their lips met in a gentle kiss. Kwon Taekjoo savored Zhenya's face so close to his, watching as Zhenya narrowed his eyes at him. When Kwon Taekjoo parted his lips slightly, Zhenya's thick tongue slid across Kwon Taekjoo's dry lips and entered his mouth. Their breaths and saliva mingled, replacing the bitter taste in Kwon Taekjoo's mouth with something sweet and intoxicating. The cut in Kwon Taekjoo's mouth stung from the kiss, but Zhenya's tongue was so soft and tender as it sucked on his that Kwon Taekjoo couldn't pull away.

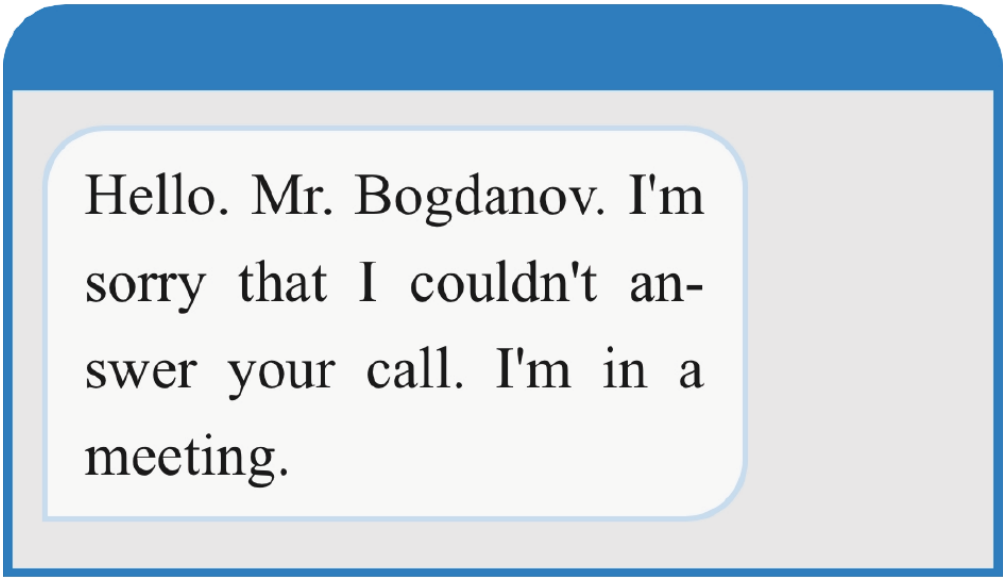
Zhenya's hands moved instinctively to grasp Kwon Taekjoo's shoulders, but Kwon Taekjoo gently guided them down. He knew Zhenya wouldn't be satisfied with just one kiss, so he gave him a series of short kisses, each one ending with a wet smack.

"Wait here. I won't take long."

Though Zhenya clung to him stubbornly, he didn't try to stop Kwon Taekjoo outright. It seemed he'd learned that his patience would eventually be rewarded with something far more tempting. He had once been a wild and untamable beast, but now he resembled a dog who only craved his owner's affection.

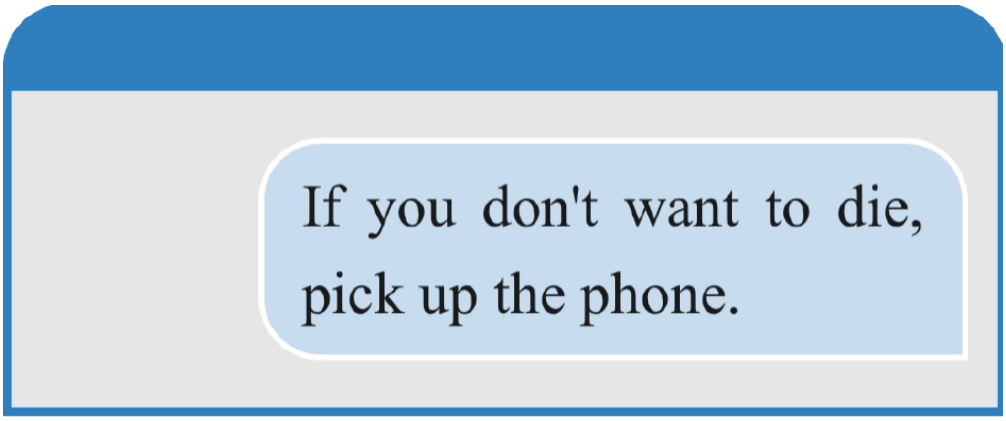
Kwon Taekjoo ruffled his hair, and Zhenya nuzzled into his neck. At the same time, Kwon Taekjoo's other hand deftly typed on the phone. Just in case the device was tapped, he placed a call to Yoon Jongwoo's social media account. Kwon Taekjoo worried that the signal might be weak since they were out at sea, but the dial tone sounded after only a brief wait.

However, no matter how long he waited, the call wasn't picked up. It was possible that an emergency had also been declared at the headquarters. He was about to send Yoon Jongwoo a message when the phone in his hand suddenly buzzed with a text notification.



[Hello. Mr. Bogdanov. I'm sorry that I couldn't answer your call. I'm in a meeting.]

Kwon Taekjoo let out a disbelieving laugh at the overly formal response. If Yoon Jongwoo had been in a situation urgent enough to miss the call, he wouldn't have had time to reply to a text. So, he was clearly lying about being in a meeting. Kwon Taekjoo quickly shot back a reply.



[If you don't want to die, pick up the phone.]

As soon as he sent the message, he hit the call button. The familiar ringtone sounded, only to abruptly stop before Kwon Taekjoo finally heard Yoon Jongwoo's long-awaited voice.

["H-Hello? Mr. Ye-Yevgeny... Uh... It's been a while. How are you?"]

"Yeah, the proper response should be, **'I'm fine, thank you,'** kid. Why are you st-st-stuttering like a fool?"

["...Huh?"]

"What do you mean, huh?"

["Is that you, Sunbae? Taekjoo sunbae? Sunbae!! What happened to you? Are you safe?"]

“You’re going to make my ears bleed, idiot. I’m calling because I’m safe, obviously.”

["Are you hurt? I heard there was a huge explosion at the site, so I was super worried! Our transmissions were cut off, and you didn’t contact me for a whole day! Seriously, I was so worried I thought I’d have to plan your funeral!"]

“Oh really? Are you sure you weren’t secretly hoping for it?”

["Hey, don’t even joke about that! Anyway, where are you? Are you okay? Have you eaten anything yet?"]

“Calm down, will you? You’re going to run out of breath. Ask your questions one at a time.”

“That’s your colleague, isn’t it?” Zhenya interrupted disdainfully, overhearing their conversation. Did Yoon Jongwoo hear him through the phone? Kwon Taekjoo heard a gulp on the other end as Yoon Jongwoo swallowed hard.

["Are you with Mr. Yevgeny? Oh, right, this account is his too, isn’t it?"]

“Why are you so formal with him? I already told you, you two are friends.”

["Sunbae, don’t rush to call someone my friend. I have no intention of considering him as such!"]

“Come on, use your head. It’d be smart to make him your friend so he at least thinks twice before killing you.”

["Uh... really? Wait, that’s not the point right now. Why is Mr. Yevgeny there in the first place?"]

“I ran into him by pure coincidence. He said he came to buy some cigars.”

["What?"]

Kwon Taekjoo laughed at Yoon Jongwoo’s incredulous reaction and glanced at Zhenya.

“See? Even he doesn’t buy your excuse.”

Not understanding their conversation, Zhenya raised an eyebrow in response. Likewise, Yoon Jongwoo had no idea what was going on.

["Sunbae?"]

“Oh, nothing. For now, I lost my transmitter and all my personal belongings, so I had no choice but to contact you this way. I’m out at sea.”

["What? ...Out at sea?"]

Kwon Taekjoo could hear Yoon Jongwoo typing on the other end of the line. It sounded like he was tracking the device’s location. Anyway, Kwon Taekjoo had been wondering where the

yacht was, so he decided to wait for Yoon Jongwoo's response while he caressed Zhenya's face.

["Sunbae. Are you in Mexico?"]

"Oh, are we in Mexico right now?"

["You didn't know?"]

"How could I have known? I was dragged here."

["You're not kidnapped, are you? Should I demand a ransom?"]

"If I were, would I be talking to you on the phone right now? Don't worry. I'm in the safest place there is," Kwon Taekjoo said, looking at Zhenya. Meanwhile, Zhenya listened carefully to the conversation, though he didn't understand a word. He seemed to be trying to grasp the gist from Kwon Taekjoo's tone.

"Anyway, I don't know when I'll be back, so Jongwoo, I need you to report to the director for me. Tell him the 'Electric Hammer' hideout was destroyed, thanks to a couple of rats throwing a literal bomb at it. I also managed to export the data from their computers..."

Kwon Taekjoo quickly whispered "USB" to Zhenya, who was still staring at him. It was the only thing he had managed to protect while evading Cuban authorities, fighting off the U.S. PMC, and surviving Zhenya's attacks.

Zhenya nodded and left the room. Kwon Taekjoo fixed his eyes on the back of Zhenya's head and continued his conversation with Yoon Jongwoo.

"I'll upload it to our group work system later, so check it out afterward."

["Understood. You really did a great job."]

"No need to flatter me. It's my usual work. Oh, by the way, what about the privately contracted soldiers? Did you manage to trace who they're affiliated with?"

["They're a multinational group of mercenaries, and they recently worked with a U.S. PMC called 'Golden Bullet.' They're no longer exactly affiliated with anyone else, but... doesn't it all smell a bit fishy? All signs point to the U.S. making a move to pin the blame on us. After all, that way they can close this cyberattack incident on their own terms. Of course, thanks to you cornering them all, it looks like they'll be the ones shouldering the blame. The higher-ups might overlook your breach of protocol this time, don't you think? Though you might still have to write an incident report."]

"Haa... another incident report? I'm so sick of that crap."

["Did you really think you'd get off scot-free? You should've escaped when you had the chance. Consider yourself lucky that everything turned out well. If things had gone wrong, this could've become a serious diplomatic issue."]

“How could I just stand by and watch our so-called ‘allies’ stab us in the back? Do you really want our country to be seen as a fool by the whole world?”

["A fool? That’s going too far. Sunbae, you really need to tone down that temper of yours if you want to live a little longer."]

“Thanks for the advice, but I have no doubt I’ll live a long life thanks to you.”

["Thanks to me? What did I do?"]

“You badmouth me all the time. Admit it, you did it just a moment ago, didn’t you?”

["Oh God, Sunbae, your grudges run deep. Aren’t you overthinking what happened in the past?"]

“Well, can you blame me for having a good memory?”

["Haa... Considering you’re joking like this; you must really be fine. And here I was losing sleep worrying about you."]

Kwon Taekjoo smirked at Yoon Jongwoo’s grumpy complaints. For some reason, teasing Yoon Jongwoo was one of those things he had never grown tired of over the years.

They chatted for a while until, all of a sudden, Kwon Taekjoo turned his head, feeling someone’s gaze on him. Zhenya had already returned and was giving him a strange look. Did he not like Kwon Taekjoo happily chatting with someone else? Maybe it was because Zhenya wanted all of Kwon Taekjoo’s attention for himself. Moments like these made Zhenya seem like nothing more than a big baby.

Seeing Zhenya sulking like a child reminded him of two other kids from before. Kwon Taekjoo decided to ask about them.

"There were some children at the scene."

["Children? Oh, I heard there were a few survivors. The Cuban authorities probably have them in custody, questioning them as we speak. Why? Are you worried about them?"]

“Yeah, well, they were just innocent kids caught up in adult greed.”

They had lost their family and home before they even had time to process it, so Kwon Taekjoo could only imagine that their daily lives were now a living hell. It wasn’t clear if the Cuban government would provide them with proper medical care and support. Kwon Taekjoo worried about things like that, only to chastise himself for going soft. After all, when had he ever cared about anything beyond his own mission objectives?

Up until recently, Kwon Taekjoo had considered all casualties from his operations as unfortunate but necessary. In his mind, he justified them as a small price to pay to eliminate a bigger threat. He had seen so much misery that he’d even begun to question the innocence of the weak, like those two children.

But this time, he couldn't act or think as coldly as before. His mind told him not to hesitate, but his heart stubbornly held him back. Strangely, Kwon Taekjoo had occasionally seen the faces of his loved ones superimposed on his targets. He recalled the words of a veteran agent who once told him that the more personal relationships you had, the more you'd hesitate to pull the trigger. At the time, Kwon Taekjoo thought that didn't apply to him, but now he wondered if it did.

"...Anyway, tell the director I'll return on my own."

["Are you sure you don't need any help getting back? The whole area will have its borders shut down, and security will be tight for a while."]

"I'll manage. It's not like I'm seriously hurt, and luckily, I have the strongest ally right here by my side."

When Kwon Taekjoo mentioned his "strongest ally," he looked at Zhenya and smiled. Zhenya asked, *"What does that mean?"*

"The most reliable and powerful monster in the world."

As Kwon Taekjoo explained in Russian, the hardness in Zhenya's expression softened. Yoon Jongwoo asked what he was talking about, but Kwon Taekjoo replied with a simple, "I'm hanging up," before handing the phone back to Zhenya. Zhenya leaned in to kiss him, but Kwon Taekjoo blocked his lips with the phone screen, thus ending the call. Zhenya's blue eyes filled with confusion at the unexpected move, but Kwon Taekjoo reached a hand out to him.

"I think I'll retrieve my USB now."

"Huh?"

Zhenya seemed to obediently hand over the USB at first. But when Kwon Taekjoo reached out to grab it, Zhenya's fist closed around it.

"What are you doing?"

"Now that I think about it, Taekjoo, this might've been yours before, but now it's in my hands, right? I don't give up anything of mine that easily."

"Oh, is that so?"

Kwon Taekjoo smiled and tilted his head. Zhenya met his gaze with a similarly smug grin, clearly anticipating Kwon Taekjoo's next move.

Kwon Taekjoo picked up the glass he had set down earlier and swirled the golden-colored whiskey inside. Zhenya briefly glanced at the glass before focusing on Kwon Taekjoo's face. Their eyes met, and Kwon Taekjoo held Zhenya's gaze as he slowly sipped the remaining whiskey. As the rich taste spread across his palate, Zhenya's smile gradually faded. He didn't blink once. His dark pupils, surrounded by a crystal-blue iris, narrowed with intensity, focusing entirely on Kwon Taekjoo.

With a loud gulp, Kwon Taekjoo drank the whiskey, his Adam's apple bobbing. When he pulled his lips away from the empty glass, a single drop of whiskey, precariously hanging between his mouth and the glass, followed the curve of his lip and trickled down. Kwon Taekjoo carefully slid his tongue to catch the drop.

"The flavor is pretty good. Want to try it?"

"Ah, that performance of yours would leave most sex spies crying," Zhenya murmured, stunned, as he caressed Kwon Taekjoo's moist lips.

His thumb brushed over the thick curve of Kwon Taekjoo's lower lip before pressing it down. Kwon Taekjoo covered Zhenya's finger with his upper lip, drawing it into his mouth, and then gently licked it with his slick, agile tongue. Zhenya's body gave a small shudder at this rare display of seduction from Kwon Taekjoo.

In the next instant, Zhenya lunged toward him. Kwon Taekjoo turned his head just in time for Zhenya's lips to graze his cheek. Then, he waved the shiny, empty glass in front of Zhenya, who was breathing heavily. Zhenya shook his head, panting, and then dropped the USB into the glass with a soft clink, making Kwon Taekjoo's lips curl into a smile. As soon as he got what he wanted, Kwon Taekjoo gently tangled his hand in Zhenya's hair and pulled him closer.

Zhenya desperately inhaled Kwon Taekjoo's whiskey-laced breath and pressed himself against him. As Kwon Taekjoo's fingers stroked Zhenya's ivory-colored hair, Zhenya breathed heavily, letting out a faint moan. His pale cheeks quickly flushed. Kwon Taekjoo found it adorable how easily Zhenya responded to his touches and breath. He felt a sense of satisfaction every time Zhenya acted so earnestly in search of his affection, especially since it was such a contrast to his usual demeanor.

Their lips met and parted repeatedly with wet, sucking sounds, their tongues pushing against one another in an obscene struggle. Meanwhile, Zhenya had climbed onto Kwon Taekjoo, holding his face and kissing him relentlessly. He seemed like a man who had tasted something sweet for the first time, desperate for more, yet his movements were still tender and gentle. Kwon Taekjoo matched his pace, caressing his ear and cheek. They both enjoyed the tiny sparks of static electricity that flickered from Kwon Taekjoo's fingertips.

Kwon Taekjoo slid his finger beneath Zhenya's heated eyes and kissed him repeatedly. Perhaps due to the rough texture of his hardened skin, Zhenya's long lashes fluttered against Kwon Taekjoo's touch, tickling the edges of his eyes and cheeks.

Kwon Taekjoo pulled his hand away, thinking his skin might be itchy, but Zhenya gently grabbed it and kissed each of his fingers before guiding it back to his cheek. Then, he placed light kisses on Kwon Taekjoo's lips. Kwon Taekjoo tilted his head to catch both Zhenya's upper lip and tongue in his mouth at once, letting out a sweet moan. Zhenya's breathing was just as deep and heavy. Kwon Taekjoo softly rubbed his hand against the tiny hairs standing up on Zhenya's cheek, over and over. He thought he'd never been this gentle with anyone before.

Drunk on their shared moment of tenderness, they continued caressing, kissing, and pressing against each other. Compared to sex, this was child's play, and yet Kwon Taekjoo couldn't help but cling to Zhenya, savoring the soft, tingling sensation it gave him.

Kwon Taekjoo's enthusiasm began to fade quickly. The tongue that had been roughly exploring Zhenya's became still. Only then did Zhenya stop and look at him. Kwon Taekjoo had been breathing heavily for a while, and now his eyes were half-closed. The fatigue he had been accumulating seemed to catch up with him all at once, possibly intensified by the strong painkiller from earlier.

"Are you going to sleep?" Zhenya asked him. Kwon Taekjoo slowly nodded, lazily extending both arms toward Zhenya.

"Come here, Yevgeny."

Zhenya approached, looking skeptical. Kwon Taekjoo flashed a faint smile and pulled him in for a hug. Pressed tightly against Kwon Taekjoo's chest, Zhenya asked, "Taekjoo?" He squirmed uncomfortably, as if something strange had just happened to him.

With his eyes already closed, Kwon Taekjoo gently stroked Zhenya's back while holding him in his arms.

"Listen, your Hyung will play with you once he gets some rest."

"What?"

"Mm, such a good boy."

"Hey, Taekjoo..."

"You should sleep too. I know you didn't get any rest, stitching up my wounds all night," he mumbled, coaxing Zhenya with sleepy, slurred words. Whenever Kwon Taekjoo was drunk or half-conscious, he would switch languages like he had earlier, a clear sign he was on the verge of passing out.

It didn't take long for his eyelids to remain still. The arm cradling Zhenya weakened and started to slip down. Zhenya lifted his head and stared at Kwon Taekjoo, who was now fast asleep. He kept his eyes on Kwon Taekjoo's sleeping figure for a while before leaning in close enough to feel his breath and inhale the sweet air he exhaled. Normally, Kwon Taekjoo would have woken up instantly, demanding he stop acting strange, but he was already in a deep sleep.

Zhenya tilted his head to rest his ear against Kwon Taekjoo's chest. The heartbeat that had once made his own race now beat slowly but steadily, making its presence known. He listened to the rhythmic thumps like a lullaby, his eyelids growing heavier. Their deep breaths synchronized into one, and soon, the sweet pull of sleep enveloped him.

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Chapter End Notes

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"Taekjoo, wake up."

Kwon Taekjoo opened his eyes sluggishly at the sound of Zhenya's voice waking him. The blinding sunlight threatened to pierce his vision, forcing him to squint and raise a hand to block it. Before he could do so, Zhenya stepped in, saving him the effort.

“We’ve arrived.”

“Arrived? Where?”

Zhenya nodded towards the window, as if urging Kwon Taekjoo to take a look for himself. Grumbling, Kwon Taekjoo pushed himself up. Despite having slept well, parts of his body ached in protest. His sense of touch felt dull, as though his entire body was swollen.

As Kwon Taekjoo struggled to sit up, Zhenya handed him a bottle of water, unusually kind in his demeanor. Kwon Taekjoo lightly patted Zhenya's cheek before quenching his thirst. He had been parched all night, so he easily drained the bottle. Afterward, he crushed it, as he always did, and made his way to the window.

According to Zhenya, the yacht was now docked at a port. Oddly enough, no other yachts were in sight. Only a few motorboats and jet skis could be seen.

Kwon Taekjoo's attention was immediately drawn to the tranquil, emerald-colored sea. There were no high-rise buildings, no residential houses… perhaps they had arrived at a remote island. The well-preserved coast suggested some form of human maintenance, but the absence of people made Kwon Taekjoo feel notably out of place.

At that moment, Zhenya approached from behind, pressing his body against Kwon Taekjoo and wrapping his arms around his shoulders. As usual, he nuzzled his face into Kwon Taekjoo's hair. Kwon Taekjoo leaned back slightly, resting against him, and opened his mouth to speak.

"Where are we?"

"I don't know."

"Jongwoo said we were in Mexico. Is that true?"

"I guess so."

"He's either right or he's not. What are you trying to say?"

"I'm just saying it doesn't matter where we are. It's peaceful here, and no one will bother us. Isn't that all we need?"

Given that they were being hunted by the authorities, Zhenya wasn't entirely wrong. But Kwon Taekjoo needed to know their exact location to be prepared for whatever came next. Zhenya was already a constant unpredictability—he didn't need more uncertainties to add to the list.

"No one will bother us? Are you telling me there's another damned place like this?"

Kwon Taekjoo responded in disbelief, only to be interrupted by the rumbling of his stomach. He realized he couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten properly, or how long it had been since he'd lost consciousness. Zhenya slid his fingers over Kwon Taekjoo's flat and noisy stomach.

"Why don't we eat first?"

Although Zhenya's tone was clearly mocking, Kwon Taekjoo was far more excited at the prospect of finally getting to eat. But Zhenya continued caressing him, pressing kisses along his neck. His hand, which had initially been stroking Kwon Taekjoo's stomach, moved lower and settled stubbornly on his crotch. Zhenya gently massaged the soft bulge of flesh and dragged his tongue along Kwon Taekjoo's ear. Kwon Taekjoo realized they could end up having another round of sex if he didn't stop it, so he slapped Zhenya's hand away.

"You said we should go eat. Why are you touching my dick?"

"Mmm… I just wanted to check how its doing. It kept leaking all night. I couldn't sleep because of it."

"You bastard, did you do it again while I was asleep?"

"Relax. You enjoy it too, don't you? You need me to fuck you every now and then so you can sleep well at night."

Sleep well? More like pass out from exhaustion, he thought.

Even long before meeting Zhenya, Kwon Taekjoo used to rest for days after returning from missions, to recover his strength and let his wounded body heal. But since getting involved with Zhenya, they had spent time together in this way, with Zhenya showing up at his mission points and whisking him away as if he were kidnapping him.

Zhenya would always watch Kwon Taekjoo closely while he slept, spoiling and excessively doting on him, only to indulge in sex whenever he pleased. Sometimes, Kwon Taekjoo would wake up in the middle of it, but Zhenya's unwavering gaze, his elevated body temperature, the way he repeatedly called his name, and even the act itself were so tender and sweet that Kwon Taekjoo often pretended not to notice.

It wasn't that Kwon Taekjoo particularly enjoyed it. He simply allowed Zhenya to do as he pleased. It was a win-win situation: Kwon Taekjoo got the desperately needed rest, and Zhenya got to satisfy his overwhelming sexual appetite. Deep down, Kwon Taekjoo wondered if he had started to believe Zhenya's insinuation that he enjoyed it too. It's often said that people who spend a lot of time together start to pick up each other's habits. Likewise, Zhenya's strange tendencies and fetishes seemed to have rubbed off on Kwon Taekjoo as well.

With a scowl of disapproval, Kwon Taekjoo pushed the grinning Zhenya away. Though he wasn't sure where they were, he decided to go out and explore now that they had finally arrived on land. First, he needed to make himself presentable, but the military uniform he had worn earlier was in tatters on the floor. He set about searching for some decent clothes.

Kwon Taekjoo first searched the closet. Inside, he found several bathrobes of different materials, along with Zhenya's clothes neatly hung one after another. Zhenya had packed a wide variety of outfits, as if he were preparing for a vacation. Kwon Taekjoo checked to see if he had brought any of his own clothes, just in case, but as expected, there was nothing of his. If Zhenya was going to fetch him, couldn't he at least have packed some clothes for him? Zhenya lacked even the most basic foresight.

Kwon Taekjoo opened a pack of new underwear, put it on, and then covered himself with a bathrobe. He didn't fuss much over his outfit choice. After all, the weather was hot, he was only going out to eat, and the outside setting looked like a typical vacation scene. He was about to close the closet when a stack of carefully arranged bags at the bottom caught his attention. Already anticipating what was inside, he checked the contents. Just as he thought, there was a large assortment of firearms. He picked up a pistol and tested the grip in his hand. It didn't fit as well as his own weapon, but it was still acceptable. Kwon Taekjoo was debating where to store it when Zhenya chuckled behind him and walked over.

"You won't need that."

"Are you sure?"

"Have you been lied to all your life?" Zhenya retorted, walking past Kwon Taekjoo and exiting the bedroom ahead of him.

"This way."

An uneasy feeling still lingered in Kwon Taekjoo, but he decided to follow Zhenya for now. As soon as he stepped off the yacht, he was greeted by a group of crew members and attendants dressed in white uniforms, forming a small entourage. They warmly welcomed Zhenya and Kwon Taekjoo, as if they had been expecting their arrival.

“Welcome, gentlemen.”

Kwon Taekjoo’s body stiffened at the grand reception, his skin prickling. Perhaps they had mistaken him for a VIP instead of a wanted fugitive.

“We were informed that you hadn’t eaten on the yacht, so we’ve prepared a meal for you. Please allow us to escort you.”

A man who appeared to be their manager stepped forward and led them along the dock. They followed him down the wooden platform, where the shallow, clear water gently lapped on either side of their path. The water was so transparent that the white sand, corals, sea urchins, starfish, and small fish on the bottom were clearly visible. As they approached deeper waters, a sea turtle glided peacefully beneath the dock, recreating a scene so vivid and surreal it felt like something from a computer-generated animation.

Though Kwon Taekjoo wanted to relax and enjoy the scene, his eyes remained alert, scanning his surroundings. Through the dense trees, a white building came into view. Given its size and the appearance of the staff, it seemed to be some kind of tourist lodging.

“What is this place, a resort?”

“I heard it was a villa,” Zhenya responded indifferently.

Kwon Taekjoo laughed incredulously. A villa with nearly 100 rooms on such a huge plot of land? What was wrong with Zhenya and the people he associated with? Did they have a habit of building palace-like villas on remote islands? As an ordinary person, Kwon Taekjoo struggled to understand the logic behind such a place.

“Rich kids,” he muttered, shaking his head.

They soon reached the end of the dock, where a large pergola provided shade from the sun. It was open on all sides, with long, billowing fabrics fluttering endlessly in the sea breeze. Below, a large table was laden with an extravagant spread of dishes. For a simple breakfast, the sheer amount of food was excessive, both in size and variety.

“Sit.”

“A simple toast and coffee would’ve been enough for breakfast. What the hell is all this? My stomach feels full just looking at it.”

It was clear they wouldn’t be able to finish all that food, and most of it would likely go to waste. Kwon Taekjoo gave a disapproving look as he pulled out a random chair, which happened to offer a perfect view of the sea. Every time the white curtains of the pergola parted; a flood of blue hues filled Kwon Taekjoo’s sight. The distant waters were a deep

indigo, but those near the shore shimmered with light jade reflections. Kwon Taekjoo stared at the breathtaking view, clicking his tongue.

"I don't know who owns this place, but… whoever it is, they've got it all to themselves. I don't like it."

"What's wrong, Taekjoo? Do you want it?"

"Why do you keep asking if I want things? Both this place and your precious Ajinoki Island are isolated and deserted. I'd feel suffocated living on either island and probably go insane if I got stuck on one of them, even for just a year," Kwon Taekjoo replied.

Zhenya's gaze shifted immediately at Kwon Taekjoo's response. His expression remained unchanged, but the way he silently sipped his water seemed a little deflated. It seemed Kwon Taekjoo had struck a nerve by criticizing the island that Zhenya had decorated himself and considered his paradise.

"Hey, the mango is really sweet. Try it."

Kwon Taekjoo slid the plate of mango slices toward Zhenya, who merely glanced at it from the corner of his eye, refusing to move his hands. Of course, he didn't want to. For a man his size, he had the emotional maturity of a child. If Kwon Taekjoo intended to convince Zhenya to return to Korea, he would have to coax him gently, but right now, Zhenya was being difficult.

"I promise, it's really sweet."

Kwon Taekjoo took a bite of a piece and offered it to Zhenya. Zhenya gave him a critical look but eventually gave in and took a bite.

"Well? It's good, right?"

"Mh."

Zhenya nodded with an unamused expression, then elegantly poured himself some black tea. He took a sip, savoring the taste for a moment before frowning and setting the cup down as he wiped his mouth. Perhaps the tea didn't meet his standards.

Spoiled brat. Eat and drink whatever they give you.

Kwon Taekjoo shot him a reprimanding look before stuffing an entire piece of bread into his mouth. Just then, he felt the presence of someone behind him. Turning around, he saw a man walking across the deck toward them, surrounded by a bustling circle of security guards. Was this the owner of this luxurious island?

"... How convenient," Zhenya muttered, clearly irritated by the man's sudden appearance.

Kwon Taekjoo kept his eyes on the approaching figure and asked, *"Who is he?"*

"I already told you, Taekjoo, you don't need to know who he is."

“Well, it looks like we’re about to meet him anyway. What’s the point in keeping it a secret?”

The man caught their inquisitive stares and responded with a broad smile, his lips curving into a grin before his eyes followed suit. In Kwon Taekjoo’s experience, nine out of ten people who smiled like that were dishonest. The way the man raised both arms in a gesture of joy made him seem cheerful on one hand but like a fraud on the other.

Kwon Taekjoo studied the man closely. His hair, skin, eyes, and lashes were dark, typical of Hispanics, and he appeared to be in his mid-thirties. His hair, almost reaching his neck, was naturally combed to one side. He wore an open shirt over a sleeveless polo, paired with white pants and sneakers. Although his appearance seemed casual at first glance, he was far from ordinary.

“Friends, I see you arrived before me.”

The man approached them without hesitation, placing his hands on the table as a strong scent of cologne filled the air. Zhenya remained indifferent, continuing his meal as usual. The man, undeterred by Zhenya’s lack of interest, focused his attention on Kwon Taekjoo. His flattering expression was already irritating, but suddenly, he winked at Kwon Taekjoo. Kwon Taekjoo frowned.

“Who the hell is this guy?”

He tightened his grip on the knife in his hand. The man let out a booming laugh at Kwon Taekjoo’s sudden, brash reaction.

“Friend, let’s not draw weapons at our first meeting. My family’s motto is to avoid fighting in the mornings, you see, it only makes the day unnecessarily long,” he said, extending a hand in greeting.

Kwon Taekjoo stared at the outstretched hand with displeasure. Undeterred, the man shook his own hand enthusiastically, as if trying to break down Kwon Taekjoo’s guard.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Matías. Matías Pérez.”

“Matías Pérez?”

Kwon Taekjoo tilted his head at the man’s name. For some reason, the name sounded horribly familiar, though he was certain they had never met before.

“Ah, I see my father’s reputation has reached even your little country. You’re Korean, right?”

“Who’s your father?”

Kwon Taekjoo ignored the man’s question and gave him a suspicious look. Matías Pérez noticed the sharp glint in Kwon Taekjoo’s eyes and smiled.

“Antonio Pérez.”

“Antonio Pérez… Matías…”

Kwon Taekjoo muttered the names under his breath, trying to recall where he had heard them before. Suddenly, he sprang up from his seat, grabbing Zhenya by the collar. Zhenya looked at him in surprise. Matías seemed equally startled.

“You bastard! Are you doing drugs?”

“Of course not. I have no interest in drugs. That’s for weak-minded fools.”

“Then why the hell do you know this guy?”

Zhenya raised an eyebrow at Kwon Taekjoo’s sudden outburst and glanced over at Matías Pérez. Matías merely shrugged, as if clueless about what was going on. Zhenya took a moment to recall their conversation, then smiled in satisfaction.

“Because they want our weapons. To protect their old cartel, they’ll need the most modern, powerful arms.”

“... Is that really all?”

Zhenya shot Kwon Taekjoo a deliberately disappointed look. Reluctantly, Kwon Taekjoo released his tight grip on Zhenya’s collar, still not fully convinced by his explanation. He continued to breathe heavily, unable to calm down, and shot a skeptical glance at Zhenya.

In Kwon Taekjoo’s defense, ‘Antonio Pérez’ was the top drug lord in Mexico. His cartel had amassed immense wealth through drug production and distribution over the years, leaving behind a trail of influential groups, illegal commissions, kidnappings, and even murders. For this reason, the Mexican government had made countless efforts to stop his growing threat. But all their attempts were futile, as the cartel always stayed one step ahead by acquiring more powerful weapons thanks to their enormous financial power.

Kwon Taekjoo could now also understand why the Cuban authorities and the Mexican government had refrained from attacking Matías’s yacht. The moment they opened fire on him, it would trigger an all-out war. The Mexican government had already made too many sacrifices in its fight against Pérez’s cartel. There was no way they’d risk getting entangled in another conflict with the cartel for the sake of another country.

Apparently, Zhenya had offered weapons to Pérez’s cartel in exchange for his and Kwon Taekjoo’s safety. It was obvious how and where those weapons would be used, and Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t rest easy knowing that.

“Damn it, you crazy bastard! What the hell did you do this time?”

“Why are you mad at me, Taekjoo? I just made a deal, like I always do.”

Kwon Taekjoo was left speechless by Zhenya’s carefree response. He had always known Zhenya was an arms dealer and had never expected him to change his ways just because of their close relationship. But the thought of Zhenya perpetuating injustice in his name was unacceptable, even if, for Zhenya, it was just business as usual.

“Who asked you to make such a stupid deal? I made it clear I didn’t want your help or interference in my affairs.”

“Who says I have to listen to every word you say?”

“What?”

“Don’t you know by now how I operate? I’ve made countless deals to get what I want. The only difference this time is that I wanted you, Taekjoo.”

Kwon Taekjoo’s head throbbed, and he felt a heavy weight pressing against his chest. He had set out to confront a cyber-terrorist threat only to end up fueling another international crime. And to think, he had been happy to see Zhenya, completely oblivious to the negotiations that had gone on behind the scenes.

Kwon Taekjoo downed his glass of water, hoping to calm his emotions, but the weight in his chest refused to lift. Zhenya continued to justify his actions to an increasingly furious Kwon Taekjoo.

“You use whatever means necessary to ensure your country’s safety too. Think about your last mission: identity fraud, trespassing, violence, murder. You’ve committed countless crimes.”

The truth was, what one country considered justice could be seen as injustice in another. That was why Kwon Taekjoo could never fully claim that his work was entirely just or right.

After making his point, Zhenya added, *“I’m the same, Taekjoo. All I did was use everything at my disposal to guarantee your safety. And I’ll keep doing it.”*

“Ah...”

Kwon Taekjoo was at a loss for words. Was he supposed to be grateful that Zhenya cared about him so much?

It wasn’t that Kwon Taekjoo had suddenly been struck by a sense of righteousness. It simply left a bitter taste in his mouth to know that Zhenya had decided to drag countless others into injustice on his behalf. Of course, Zhenya had never been the type to think about where and how each of his weapons would be used. But Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t shake the heavy feeling in his chest, wondering if this deal could have been avoided had he never gotten involved.

“The items I offer are just chunks of metal. Whether they’re used to protect or harm others... it all depends on who uses them.”

“Sure, as if they’ll ever be used for the common good.”

“Even if they aren’t, it’s not our concern. Would you condemn every private military company as evil? What about your own country’s military? Are their ideas of justice any more valid?”

Zhenya’s words weren’t wrong. Any nation would want to invest in its military and acquire new weapons to strengthen national defense. While that would bring prosperity to its citizens,

it would also pose a threat to neighboring countries. Was it even possible to distinguish between right and wrong when it came to such actions? Just like dynamite wasn't invented to kill, there was no good reason to insist that the production and distribution of weapons were inherently guilty. There wasn't even an absolute sense of justice to begin with. On any given day, a person's sense of justice could shift depending on their personal circumstances and beliefs.

Even so, Kwon Taekjoo hoped that one day Zhenya's life would move from darkness toward the light, that he might gravitate toward Kwon Taekjoo's position. Was it too ambitious of him to wish for such a thing?

"Alright, alright, that's enough. Look, I don't know why you two are suddenly arguing, but can we focus on enjoying our food during meals, please?"

With a clap, Matías tried to diffuse the cold tension in the air. Then, he took the last empty chair and began to study Kwon Taekjoo closely. When Kwon Taekjoo ignored his blatant stare to keep looking at Zhenya, Matías tapped his plate to get Kwon Taekjoo's attention.

"Look here, friend. You haven't even told me your name yet."

"Trust me, it's better if you don't know."

"And why's that?"

"I'm obligated to kill anyone who knows my identity."

"Huh?"

Zhenya burst out laughing at the look of shock on Matías's face. Spreading butter on his bread with an overly casual, carefree motion, he seemed quite pleased.

Matías finally nodded, as if saying he understood. Despite Kwon Taekjoo's coldness, Matías didn't waver and continued with his cheerful remarks.

"So, what should I call you?"

"No need to call me anything. I'll be leaving soon anyway."

"Ha! I think I've got your personality figured out, friend. But what are we supposed to do? It's going to be a challenge to leave this place right away."

"If you get in our way, I'll have no choice but to handle things my way."

Kwon Taekjoo's grip tightened around his knife. It wasn't a bluff… he could easily take down an opponent with just a fork or chopsticks. And depending on how the situation played out, he was fully prepared to do so. His dark eyes flashed with a dangerous, sharp glint.

Matías Pérez raised both hands in a gesture of surrender, as if to say Kwon Taekjoo had misunderstood him.

“That’s not what I meant, friend. Turns out the Cuban government requested help from the Mexican government. Apparently, they want them to hand over the ‘terrorism suspect’ our Pérez cartel took in. Those government rats have been waiting for a chance to strike at us, and this gives them a good excuse to do it. Why make a move and expose ourselves now? Better to lie low and enjoy our days without worry until the right opportunity comes.”

“And here I thought we had grabbed hold of a rotten rope, but it turns out it was a detonator instead,” Kwon Taekjoo muttered to himself. He nudged Zhenya’s foot with his own.

“Hey, are you sure we can trust this guy?”

“No, he’s not trustworthy.”

“What?”

“Taekjoo, I’m the only one you should trust. Just because our buyer isn’t trustworthy doesn’t mean you should doubt the value of my weapons.”

“I’m just questioning his sincerity. It’s always guys like him who end up stabbing us in the back.”

Kwon Taekjoo glanced at Matías Pérez from head to toe with a wary look. Matías didn’t seem to understand their conversation in Russian, as he merely responded with a bright smile.

“See, just look at him. His pretentious behavior reminds me of those thugs you run into in some alley.”

“Well, you’re not entirely wrong,” Zhenya agreed with a mocking smile.

Kwon Taekjoo sighed at their pointless conversation. He had managed to break into a cyber gang’s base and barely escape, only to end up in the territory of a drug lord. The absurdity of it all made him burst into laughter.

“Well, I don’t know why you two are being chased by those Cubans, but I’ll make sure you have a safe passage back home. In the meantime, enjoy your stay at my villa. There’s no need to worry. This is the safest place in the world,” Matías said confidently, guaranteeing their security.

Kwon Taekjoo found himself between a man wielding the world’s most powerful weapon and another claiming to have the strongest shield. Was this island now supposed to be some sort of impenetrable fortress? Kwon Taekjoo was completely baffled.

“To hell with security. Just make sure we can get home as soon as possible.”

“Don’t you think you’re being a bit reckless? You might want to heal from your wounds first, right?”

Matías nodded toward Kwon Taekjoo, motioning to his body. Kwon Taekjoo followed his gaze to his bare chest and his bandaged shoulder peeking out from his loose robe. Although Matías didn't seem to have bad intentions, Kwon Taekjoo still felt uneasy with him peeking under his clothes. He certainly belonged to the type of people Kwon Taekjoo disliked. Gripping the edges of his robe, Kwon Taekjoo firmly shut him down.

"That's none of your business."

"Oh, no need to be so cautious. I'm only interested in women, you know."

Matías seemed always ready to counter Kwon Taekjoo's sharp glares with a broad smile. With a snap of his fingers, he added, "Speaking of which, should I arrange for some girls to join us? That way, it won't be so boring."

"No need."

Kwon Taekjoo glanced at Zhenya, silently asking if he felt the same. Zhenya's lips curved into a smile.

"Are you serious? Wait, why not? Wouldn't it be dull spending all day with just each other? I can't exactly stick around to entertain you two the whole time, you know?"

"That's actually a relief to hear."

"No need to keep up appearances, friend. It's natural for a man to seek a woman. Isn't that right, Bogdanov?"

Matías turned to Zhenya for confirmation. But Zhenya's gaze was fixed solely on Kwon Taekjoo. Matías's eyes widened in surprise as Zhenya burst out laughing.

"You heard him. He already said he doesn't need it."

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Matías Pérez's villa consisted of 70 independent rooms with all sorts of luxurious amenities, including a banquet hall, a meeting room, two swimming pools, four dining halls, a bar stocked with a variety of drinks, a gym outfitted with modern exercise equipment, and a meditation room with magnificent views of the sea. Additionally, it had a tennis court, a shooting range, and a theater. For its size and opulence, it was comparable to a high-end resort.

But what Kwon Taekjoo liked most was the absence of other people besides himself, Zhenya, and Matías. Matías had assigned both Zhenya and Kwon Taekjoo individual rooms, but it didn't make much sense since they spent most of their time in Kwon Taekjoo's room. The rooms were spacious and well-equipped with all the essentials, so there was no discomfort in sharing the space. In fact, Kwon Taekjoo felt increasingly uneasy and anxious whenever Zhenya wasn't around.

Inside the room, the panoramic windows offered breathtaking views of the emerald sea. When Kwon Taekjoo opened the glass door leading to the terrace, a warm, salty breeze gently brushed against him. Despite the scorching sun, the efficient air conditioning kept them from being exposed to the intense heat. The air was perfectly balanced—not too humid, not too dry. Since there was always plenty of food and water, there didn't seem to be any issues with supplies, despite being on an island. It was the perfect paradise—if only Kwon Taekjoo could put aside his personal concerns.

However, the place wasn't without its flaws. The island was completely isolated due to its fortress-like nature, with no internet or mobile phone service available. The only way Kwon Taekjoo could communicate with the outside world was through Zhenya, who wasn't particularly restricted by the island's limitations because he used his own satellite network.

The only problem was that Zhenya didn't allow Kwon Taekjoo to use his laptop or phone. Despite Kwon Taekjoo's protests, accusing him of being unreasonable, Zhenya stubbornly held firm, insisting that he couldn't compromise his strict business protocols. Every time Kwon Taekjoo wanted to report back to headquarters, he had to be affectionate with Zhenya.

As part of his security protocol, Zhenya restricted his phone line to a few numbers, so Kwon Taekjoo had to communicate through Yoon Jongwoo.

["Cuba is still an issue, but Mexico has also been showing unusual activity lately. For the past two days, they've closed their borders and increased their investigative procedures. The director advises you to stay under the radar until their surveillance eases."]

It was just as expected. Perhaps it was a small relief to have found a place to hide, despite the methods used.

Before leaving the country, he had told his mother that he was going to Russia for official government business. He also called her daily, letting her hear Zhenya's voice, which seemed to put her at ease. Even if his return was delayed by a few days, she probably wouldn't worry as much as before. And so, Kwon Taekjoo continued his days on the island, unable to clearly tell if this was a vacation or a form of imprisonment.

During the first few days, he stayed in his room. Matías Pérez had promised him that the island was the safest place in the world, but Kwon Taekjoo needed to verify that for himself.

He frequently checked for any signs of activity on or around the island. But aside from the occasional helicopter that arrived every now and then, there were no other visitors, and no one seemed to leave the island. Kwon Taekjoo had asked Matías Pérez about this once when they were eating together.

"None of the staff here seem to ever leave the island. Don't they go home after work? Are they something like live-in employees? Or do they take long breaks, like on a cruise?"

"Oh, the attendants? They've chosen to spend their entire lives here."

"What?"

"I'm their family, and this is their home. If they need supplies, I can send them via helicopter. I imagine you've noticed some deliveries during your stay."

Matías had an annoyingly grand expression on his face. Until then, Kwon Taekjoo thought only mafia bosses bragged about being part of the "Family," but it seemed that cartel organizations weren't much different. It was hard to understand why anyone would voluntarily give up their rights and freedom. Where did such loyalty come from? Even if they received significant financial compensation, it wouldn't do them any good if they were confined to one place. Kwon Taekjoo figured the only incentive more valuable than money was drugs. Maybe they were promised an endless supply of drugs in exchange for a lifetime of servitude.

In any case, Kwon Taekjoo wanted no part in any of it. No matter how friendly or charming his host seemed, he couldn't trust someone with such a notorious criminal background. In fact, that's why Kwon Taekjoo had intercepted all communications within Matías Pérez's villa.

Kwon Taekjoo spent all day inside the residence, keeping a close watch on Matías and his staff. He even snuck into Matías's room when he wasn't around. The room wasn't much different from Kwon Taekjoo's, except for a locked safe hidden behind a desk.

Kwon Taekjoo thought it would be a good idea to inspect the contents of the safe while he had the chance. The only question was how to open it without leaving a trace. As he was leaving Matías Pérez's room, lost in thought, he suddenly felt a presence behind him. Kwon Taekjoo immediately drew his gun and aimed at the figure. The person standing calmly in front of the barrel, arms crossed, was none other than Zhenya.

"Damn it! You scared me, you idiot!"

"Taekjoo. Is this how you entertain yourself when you're bored? Or are you just too obsessed with your work?"

"I'd say you're the one being too careless. What exactly made you trust someone you just met and put my fate in his hands?"

"I told you; you just have to trust me."

"Who says I don't trust you?"

Zhenya raised an eyebrow without saying a word, a silent reproach that seemed to say, "Just look at yourself."

Feeling a pang of guilt, Kwon Taekjoo muttered in disapproval, "You know, we have an old Korean saying that goes: 'Even a stone bridge should be tested with a tap before crossing it.' It never hurts to be cautious."

"So, you still don't trust me."

"It's not that I don't trust you, it's just that…"

"You're worried I might put you in danger."

"I told you; you've got the wrong idea."

It wasn't Zhenya that Kwon Taekjoo didn't trust; it was Matías Pérez. This was the first time they had met, and he was supposedly the head of one of the most infamous criminal organizations in the world. There was no valid reason to ignore that fact and place his trust in him.

For now, as long as he was with Zhenya, Kwon Taekjoo believed he could navigate any complicated situation, no matter how unexpected. But even so, he couldn't fully relax. Did that mean he didn't trust Zhenya?

“I would never put you in danger,” Zhenya assured him firmly, with no trace of his usual playful tone.

To Zhenya, Kwon Taekjoo’s constant worry about his safety seemed like a sign of distrust. Since arriving at Matías Pérez’s villa, Kwon Taekjoo had been tense, which undoubtedly unsettled Zhenya as well.

“... I told you I trust you.”

With a heavy sigh, Kwon Taekjoo lowered his gun. As he did, the clear seawater beyond the glass wall caught his attention, glittering brightly. Dark green palm leaves swayed gently in the pleasant breeze, and sunlight filtered through, casting a warm glow on Zhenya’s blonde hair.

Maybe Zhenya thought Kwon Taekjoo was trying to change the subject subtly. Zhenya narrowed his eyes and gave Kwon Taekjoo a cynical look.

“What’s up now, you bastard?”

“Fine. I’ll pretend I don’t know what you’re up to and play along.”

“What are you talking about? Come on, follow me.”

Kwon Taekjoo gave Zhenya a light push on the chest and motioned him forward. As they walked, he discreetly checked the locations of the security cameras in each corridor. Zhenya followed after a moment, shaking his head.

They exited through the back door, heading toward the sea. While the waters near the front entrance, by the yacht dock, resembled those of a private beach at a luxury resort, this area was more of a quiet, secluded beach adjacent to the villa.

Two sunbeds lay beneath a white sail-shaped canopy. Between two tall palm trees hung a large hammock, big enough for both of them. A small bar, attached to the main house, caught Kwon Taekjoo’s eye. It offered both drinks and food, allowing them to help themselves whenever they wanted.

“Want to grab a drink first?”

“With this weather? As if one drink would be enough. Let’s hop on those things before we get drunk.”

Kwon Taekjoo nodded toward the beach, where a few jet skis rocked gently on the water. Matías Pérez had mentioned throwing parties from time to time, inviting friends, and it seemed the jet skis were for that purpose. They each grabbed a key from the bar and settled onto their jet skis.

Whenever the two spent time together, they often got into extreme sports. Whether it was flying planes, skydiving, paragliding, mountain climbing, skiing, snowboarding, or free

diving, their outings were more like intense training sessions than regular dates. Even so, both enjoyed the thrill, so there were no complaints.

When Kwon Taekjoo started the engine, a pleasant vibration coursed through his body. His injuries had healed quickly after several days of rest, and since then, he had been eager to get out and do something.

“When was the last time we rode one of these? Was it in Italy?”

“No, it was Hong Kong.”

“Right, those bastards. They were really persistent. I seriously thought I was done for that day.”

Kwon Taekjoo slowly maneuvered the jet ski as he recalled a dangerous mission in which he had been chased by a Chinese triad. He glided across the water at a leisurely pace, as if taking a test run, then made a wide turn and circled back. His speeding jet ski came to a sudden stop right in front of Zhenya, spraying him with a large splash of water. Zhenya let out a disbelieving laugh and shot him a glare, but Kwon Taekjoo just grinned from ear to ear.

“Your hyung will lead the way first, kid.”

With that playful provocation, Kwon Taekjoo sped off, leaving Zhenya behind. The smooth surface of the water quickly turned into white foam in his wake. The hot, sticky air clinging to his skin transformed into a refreshing breeze that whipped through his hair. The waters, about 15 meters deep, were so clear he could see beneath the surface as his jet ski carved a long, fluid path. The sensation was invigorating, as if a weight had been lifted from him instantly.

Shortly after, the roar of an engine thundered behind him. Kwon Taekjoo glanced back and saw Zhenya right on his tail. They were so close that if he hesitated for even a second, they could easily collide. The once-relaxed expression on Zhenya's face was now alight with the thrill of the chase, much like when he hunted reindeer.

Seeing Zhenya’s expression, Kwon Taekjoo responded sarcastically, *"Oh, I’m shaking with fear. You’re chasing me like you want to kill me.”*

“Well, isn’t this a daring rabbit showing off in front of a bear.”

“Excuse me, who’s showing off? Why don’t you catch me first, and then we’ll talk.”

Kwon Taekjoo’s lips curled into a grin as he increased his speed, leaning forward to cut through the wind. His jet ski roared and shot off like a true projectile. He jerked the stiff handlebars sharply, zigzagging in wide arcs. Zhenya followed with ease, and the two swerved around each other, narrowly avoiding a collision.

No matter how hard they accelerated, the sea stretched endlessly ahead of them, with no other islands or rocks in sight. As Kwon Taekjoo made a wide turn around the perimeter, Zhenya stayed right behind him. No matter where or how Kwon Taekjoo tried to escape, Zhenya

chased relentlessly. Their movements were so synchronized, it was as if they had choreographed the whole thing beforehand.

Kwon Taekjoo, keeping an eye on Zhenya's position, broke into a wide smile. Zhenya's face also lit up with a grin of pure exhilaration.

They zigzagged through the water without pause. Kwon Taekjoo felt a surge of excitement as Zhenya kept up with him, despite his efforts to shake him off. It was like reliving their childhood days. They skimmed the water freely, unhindered by time or circumstance. Kwon Taekjoo's hair whipped wildly against the gusts of wind that pushed him with the same force as he accelerated. His excitement soared as bursts of laughter erupted from him.

"Zhenya! When are you going to catch me? At this rate, you'll be chasing me all day."

"You've got some nerve provoking me. How do you plan to deal with the consequences?"

"Eh, not sure there will be any consequences for me."

Kwon Taekjoo's taunts seemed to spur Zhenya on, because as Kwon Taekjoo made a turn, Zhenya shot past him, speeding off into the distance before abruptly circling back toward him. The gap between them closed quickly as Zhenya's jet ski surged forward, heading straight for Kwon Taekjoo. Thinking Zhenya was just testing his nerves, Kwon Taekjoo poked his head out past the windshield. But instead of swerving, Zhenya kept accelerating recklessly, leaning forward with no intention of dodging Kwon Taekjoo. They looked like they were going to crash at any moment.

"... Ahh, you psycho!"

Kwon Taekjoo yanked hard on his controls, barely dodging Zhenya's jet ski at the last second. Zhenya's powerful wake crashed over him like a waterfall, drenching him from head to toe and leaving him unable to even open his eyes. The roar of the water clogged his ears, completely drowning him.

Zhenya maneuvered his jet ski closer to Kwon Taekjoo's. The beating waves nudged the two jet skis together, causing them to lightly brush against each other. Kwon Taekjoo rubbed his irritated eyes while scolding Zhenya.

"What the hell, man! What if one of us got hurt?"

"That's why I told you to think about the consequences."

"Do you even know how to joke? Damn, I thought we'd be planning our funerals for a second."

"You're so dramatic. Did you really think I was going to hurt you?"

"Well, it sure looked like you were about to."

"Taekjoo, don't you think you should have a little more faith in your partner?"

“Were you born without remorse? Ugh, damn it. This stings like hell.”

“Come here. I’ll lick it for you.”

Suddenly, Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taekjoo’s wrist. Kwon Taekjoo obediently followed, climbing onto Zhenya’s jet ski. The jet ski rocked vigorously under the added weight, though it wasn’t a problem. Kwon Taekjoo flopped onto Zhenya’s thighs, carelessly brushing the wet hair off his forehead. Zhenya held his face and, slowly but steadily, slid his tongue from Kwon Taekjoo’s eyes down to the area under his ears. Then, with delicate care, he gently licked the skin below Kwon Taekjoo’s eyes and soothed his reddened eyelids.

Zhenya’s movements were careful and affectionate, but Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t help but burst into laughter from the ticklish sensation. When Zhenya looked at him in confusion, Kwon Taekjoo lightly stroked his cheek and gave him a quick kiss on his salty lips.

“I’m good now. After all that fun, I’m dying of thirst. Let’s get a drink.”

Kwon Taekjoo grabbed Zhenya’s shoulder and shifted to sit behind him, giving him a light pat on the back as a signal to go. Zhenya complied, steering them back to the beach. Kwon Taekjoo held tightly to Zhenya’s waist, trying not to fall off the jet ski.

As usual, Zhenya glanced at Kwon Taekjoo’s arms clinging to him. He always fixated on moments like these. Kwon Taekjoo wondered why Zhenya was so fascinated by this gesture when they were already lovers. For a man with so few redeemable human qualities, it was both endearing and a bit pitiful to see Zhenya act like a boy captivated by his first love at times. Kwon Taekjoo rested his head on Zhenya’s broad shoulder and looked back at his own jet ski, now growing smaller in the distance.

“What are we going to do with the jet ski?”

“The waves will bring it back to shore eventually.”

“Are you being a little careless just because it’s not yours?”

“Would it matter much if it were mine?”

Zhenya shrugged, as if it didn’t concern him. Kwon Taekjoo was speechless. Just as expected… rich bastards like Zhenya didn’t know how to value the things around them.

“So, did your little ‘exploration’ satisfy you?”

“Exploration? What do you mean?”

“You pretended to come out here to relax, but you really wanted to scout the island.”

Caught off guard, Kwon Taekjoo missed his chance to come up with a response. He couldn’t even make up an excuse because Zhenya had nailed it. When he stayed silent, Zhenya gave him a knowing look and snorted.

“So, what do you think? Swimming off the island would be impossible, right? And with a jet ski that small, you wouldn’t get very far.”

“…”

“Paragliding also seems out of the question, given that the island doesn’t have a steep enough slope to jump from, and the winds here are too calm. Am I right?”

Zhenya’s list of escape methods started to sound painfully familiar to Kwon Taekjoo, and he suddenly realized Zhenya was reciting all the ways he had tried to escape him in the past.

Finally, he understood why Zhenya was grinning so cheerfully.

“Who do you think you’re mocking?”

He slapped Zhenya’s back in frustration. Zhenya kept smiling, completely unfazed.

“Taekjoo. You think too much.”

“And you don’t think enough, idiot.”

“Only the weak have to overthink everything because every moment feels like a risk.”

“Wow, must be nice for you,” Kwon Taekjoo retorted sarcastically, quickly giving up on trying to reason with Zhenya. He knew it would take more than a round trip to hell for Zhenya to learn some basic decency.

Finally, Zhenya’s jet ski reached the beach. Zhenya dismounted first and effortlessly lifted Kwon Taekjoo to the ground. Then he comforted his lover, who, in his words, ‘thought too much.’

“Don’t worry. You don’t need to think so hard about this. When the time comes, I’ll put you right where you belong.”

Could he really trust those words? A seed of doubt sprouted in his heart, as it always did, but he also felt an impulsive urge to simply trust Zhenya with everything.

Kwon Taekjoo looked up at Zhenya and smiled. “Wow, I’m honestly impressed you’d say that, you bastard.”

“Well, turns out my lover is a man of few desires. I just wish he wanted more.”

“Oh, so you’ve finally decided to listen to me? Fantastic. In that case, why don’t you go grab us a drink while you’re at it?”

“Huh? Taekjoo, do you really think you can just order me aro—?”

“Yes, yes, I’m the first person to ever treat you this way. Got it. Now go. Hurry up.”

Kwon Taekjoo waved him off and settled onto the nearest sunbed. As he stretched out under the canopy, completely soaked, the breeze felt cool and refreshing against his skin. At the same time, the sand, warmed by the sun, began to heat his back and hips. A cold beer to wash away the salty taste in his mouth would have been the perfect touch to complete the atmosphere.

Zhenya didn't take long to return, settling into the empty sunbed next to Kwon Taekjoo. A single bottle of beer dangled from his hand.

"And where's mine?"

"You just said to bring something to drink, not specifically for you."

"Aah... You're a rude idiot. Did I really need to spell it out...?"

Zhenya took a sip from the bottle, seemingly indifferent, even as Kwon Taekjoo complained. The sound of each gulp echoed in Kwon Taekjoo's ears as he watched Zhenya's throat bob up and down with every swallow. Kwon Taekjoo swallowed dryly, mesmerized by the sight.

Once his thirst was quenched, Zhenya let out a satisfied exhale, the scent of alcohol hanging in the air. Kwon Taekjoo's patience finally wore thin. He reached for the half-empty bottle in Zhenya's hand, but Zhenya dodged effortlessly, taking another sip just to tease him. Kwon Taekjoo's throat tensed. Less than a third of the beer was left.

Kwon Taekjoo bit his dry lip, gesturing for Zhenya to hand over the remaining beer. But Zhenya only looked at him with a distracted expression and brought the last bit of beer straight to his lips.

Unable to wait any longer, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed Zhenya by the shoulders and pulled him down. He pressed his lips urgently against Zhenya's, savoring the bubbly, carbonated drink as it fizzed on his tongue, filling his mouth with the rich taste of malt beer. Thirsty and eager, Kwon Taekjoo's tongue tangled with Zhenya's slippery one, only heightening his craving. He held Zhenya's face and sucked on his tongue with a series of wet, slurping sounds.

The corners of Zhenya's lips curled into a grin as his hand slid into Kwon Taekjoo's shorts, stroking his thighs and backside with insatiable intent.

How much time had passed?

Kwon Taekjoo froze as he sensed someone nearby. When he looked up, he saw an attendant standing right in front of them. The attendant bowed before placing a beer and fries on the table next to their sunbeds. Kwon Taekjoo remained still while the employee finished and discreetly withdrew. His face was completely neutral, giving no indication he had seen anything unusual. Of course, that didn't mean he hadn't witnessed Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya locked in an intimate embrace.

The tips of Kwon Taekjoo's ears burned. He noticed Zhenya smirking beside him and grabbed him by the collar.

“You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. You’re the one who attacked me, Taekjoo.”

Kwon Taekjoo’s anger simmered just below the surface, but he knew Zhenya was right, so he stewed in his own frustration in silence.

“Get lost,” he muttered before breaking free from Zhenya’s hold and swatting away the hand massaging his butt, as if it were a bothersome fly. Kwon Taekjoo quenched his thirst with the beer on the table, drinking so fast that his head spun for a moment.

He returned to the sunbed with a second bottle in hand.

Kwon Taekjoo stared at the waves that ceaselessly rolled up to his feet and then retreated back into the sea. When was the last time he had enjoyed such a luxury? After days in an unfamiliar place without anything noteworthy happening, his sense of reality seemed to be slipping away. If someone were to tell him that all this was a dream, he wouldn’t find it hard to believe.

He lay there for a long time, dazed, when Zhenya suddenly moved toward him, grabbing his exposed leg with both hands. Kwon Taekjoo glanced briefly at the hands on his leg before looking back at the distant horizon. He didn’t react or give much thought as Zhenya lifted his ankle and began massaging his thigh.

“You still have cramps in your muscles.”

“Yeah, thanks to a certain someone.”

“So, it’s my fault again?”

“Of course. What’s the point of you massaging me all day if I’m going to get cramps again at night because of your lust?”

“Oh? So, you were looking forward to do it tonight?”

If twisting words were an art, Zhenya would be a master.

“Haa,” Kwon Taekjoo sighed, lifting his foot slightly.

Zhenya’s hand momentarily lost contact with his foot before grabbing Kwon Taekjoo again, sliding his hand from his calf to his knee, then higher up his thigh, slipping under Kwon Taekjoo’s shorts. With his other hand, Zhenya gripped the edge of the sunbed, climbing on top of Kwon Taekjoo.

The bright sunlight in Kwon Taekjoo’s eyes indicated that the sun was beginning to set. The rays started to dip lower in the sky, casting a blinding light on Zhenya’s back. The slight orange glimmers reflecting on the ocean surface created the perfect backdrop for Zhenya, as if the scene had been made just for him. The light made his ivory-colored hair and pale skin glow more intensely than before. Even his blue eyes, now gazing at Kwon Taekjoo’s reflection, took on a translucent quality.

Kwon Taekjoo reached out to brush his fingers through Zhenya's fine hair. Zhenya tilted his head to nuzzle into Kwon Taekjoo's outstretched hand.

"...Damn bastard. I'll admit, you really do have a pretty face," Kwon Taekjoo muttered under his breath. It was an unconscious thought that slipped out. He felt relieved that he had spoken in Korean, because that meant Zhenya had no way of understanding what he had just said. Or at least, that's what he thought. For some reason, Zhenya, who had been watching him intently, broke into a wide grin.

"Taekjoo. Do you really think I'm that pretty?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, pretending ignorance, huh? Unfortunately for you, I remember that little woman always calling me with that Korean word. At first, I thought she was mispronouncing my name, but I soon realized she wasn't."

Zhenya had an irritating smile on his face. It was obvious that he had figured out the meaning of the word long ago. Now that Kwon Taekjoo thought about it, there had been a similar situation with the word "Saekki." Zhenya had made a mental note of the word to look it up later, only for the unfortunate situation to arise where, due to the limitations of online translators, Zhenya had come to believe that "saekki" meant 'baby.' Ever since then, whenever Kwon Taekjoo called him "saekki," Zhenya couldn't help but wear a smug expression.

Kwon Taekjoo had only recently realized this misunderstanding. One night, while out drinking with Yoon Jongwoo after work, Zhenya had unexpectedly shown up in front of them. With no other option, Kwon Taekjoo had to let him join and fooled Yoon Jongwoo into thinking that he had invited Zhenya.

Kwon Taekjoo's mother had called, reminding him not to stay out too late and to drink in moderation. Yoon Jongwoo insisted on greeting her, so Kwon Taekjoo put the call on speaker for the rest of the conversation.

"Ma'am! It's Jongwoo. How are you?"

["Oh, Jongwoo. It's been a while since I've seen you. Are you busy these days?"]

"No, not exactly..."

["Really? Then you should come visit me one of these days. You can come with Taekjoo, or just come alone when you're free. I'll make your favorite dishes. How about that?"]

"I'd be happy to visit anytime you invite me, ma'am."

["Oh, dear Jongwoo, you're such a sweetheart. It's not an empty promise, so you have to come, okay?"]

"Yes, ma'am. I'll make sure to drop by soon. Don't worry about us, you should go to bed—it's getting late. I'll make sure to get Sunbae home before dark."

Yoon Jongwoo chatted politely with Kwon Taekjoo's mother, as he always did, before finishing the call and picking up a lettuce wrap. Just as he was about to take a bite, he hesitated, his eyes darting nervously under the weight of a piercing gaze from across the table. When he looked up and met Zhenya's eyes, he froze. Zhenya was glaring at him in disapproval, arms crossed. His stare was so intense it looked like he might kill Yoon Jongwoo on the spot. Kwon Taekjoo elbowed Zhenya.

"What's your problem now?"

"Why does that idiot keep calling the little woman 'mother'?"

"Oh, so now you know what 'mother' means in Korean? When did you learn that?"

"It'd be harder not to learn it, Taekjoo, since it's the word you say the most gently."

"Oh, well... Don't worry about it. It's just a common way of addressing someone. In Korea, a friend's mother is considered your mother, and their father is your father, and so on."

"How does that even make sense?"

"In the past, we used to consider even our neighbors as cousins."

"How ridiculous."

"If it bothers you so much, then you can call her that too. Seriously, you always pick fights over the most insignificant things."

To a still-frozen Yoon Jongwoo, Kwon Taekjoo said, "Ignore him and keep eating." Yoon Jongwoo shoved the lettuce wrap into his mouth, chewing slowly while sneaking quick, nervous glances at Zhenya.

"Stop glaring at him and finish eating. The meat's burning."

"Mm."

Zhenya scooped some rice onto his spoon with a look of disdain, but that was all. He didn't touch the meat or even bring the spoon to his mouth. Instead, he just continued to watch Kwon Taekjoo. When Taekjoo frowned and asked what was wrong, Zhenya slightly tilted his head toward his spoon, clearly waiting for Kwon to add some side dishes to his rice. The whole situation was embarrassing with Yoon Jongwoo watching.

*"Damn it, you're acting like a kid again. Don't you have your own hands? I even gave you a fork, so use it, you **bastard**."*

"Taekjoo, your colleague is here. Show some decency."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Kwon Taekjoo frowned and looked across the table to see that Yoon Jongwoo was staring intently into his bowl of noodles. The way Yoon was slowly picking at the noodles made it

obvious he felt guilty. Kwon Taekjoo crossed his arms and stared at him. Yoon's eyes lifted for a second but quickly averted when their gazes met. He was acting so suspiciously that Kwon decided to press him for an explanation.

"Hey. You know what's going on, right? Why is he acting like this?"

"What? A-Acting like what?"

"Can't you see how puffed up his shoulders are? He looks so damn proud of himself, walking around with his head held high."

"I-I-I don't know what you're talking about."

"You look like you do."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do."

"Ugh... this isn't fair, Sunbae. If you think about it, it's not even my fault!"

"I'll be the judge of that. So, what's the story?"

"Well, here's the thing... Do you remember the last time when you left the two of us together to go to your university meeting? He mentioned how you kept calling him 'saekki,' and he looked it up in an online translator, and it came up as 'baby.' He asked me if that was right, and so I..."

"So, you what? Did you really tell him it was true?"

"Well, how was I supposed to tell him that it actually means 'bastard' when he was asking so excitedly? It was just a little white lie. Besides, that's what the translator told him, and technically 'saekki' can mean 'baby,' so really, I didn't lie at all."

Yoon Jongwoo kept offering excuses with a pitiful expression, on the verge of tears. Kwon Taekjoo was so bewildered that he leaned back, struggling to contain his frustration. Yoon anxiously glanced at Taekjoo and continued to defend himself.

"Anyway, Mr. Yevgeny was super happy with that explanation, and I didn't think he'd ever find out the truth unless you told him. Plus, you don't mean it in a bad way when you call him that, right? Don't you think it'll be fine?"

"Yeah, yeah, you did great. It's not even a big deal. All I have to do now is put up with this bastard's unbearable attitude every time I call him that."

"Taekjoo, what are you whispering about over there?" Zhenya asked, his voice carrying a clear note of irritation. At this rate, he was going to take out his frustration on poor, innocent Yoon Jongwoo, so Kwon gave a vague answer and tried to change the subject.

“I told him not to be so picky about the side dishes and just eat what’s given. You should eat too.”

Meanwhile, Kwon Taekjoo placed a piece of well-cooked meat onto Zhenya’s rice. Only then did Zhenya finally take a spoonful of rice and meat into his mouth. Feeling comforted by Taekjoo, he shot another threatening look at Yoon Jongwoo.

Even recalling the whole experience made Kwon Taekjoo’s cheeks flush with embarrassment. He often scolded Zhenya to learn some Korean if he wanted to stay in the country. Ironically, the more Korean Zhenya learned, the more trouble he caused Kwon, especially because Zhenya had a knack for interpreting words however he pleased.

Reluctantly, Kwon Taekjoo tried to pull his hand away, but Zhenya caught it, pulled it toward him, and turned to place a kiss on his palm.

“If you think this face is so pretty, then look at it and touch it as much as you want. Taekjoo, I’ll only allow you to.”

Kwon Taekjoo realized for sure that no one had ever touched Zhenya the way he was now. It wasn’t just his face... Zhenya only let Taekjoo reach his vulnerable places, like his neck and his penis. For a man with countless enemies who didn’t hesitate to punish those who crossed him, Zhenya was utterly defenseless when it came to Taekjoo. The thought sent a helpless tingle through him. The center of his palm throbbed with a heated energy.

“Damn it, you pretty little bastard,” Kwon Taekjoo muttered irritably, pulling Zhenya closer. Zhenya willingly complied as Kwon Taekjoo peppered his face with kisses, letting out soft, satisfied moans between breaths. They spent a long time stroking each other’s hair and ears, exchanging tender kisses before pulling slightly apart.

The sun had already dipped lower in the sky, casting an orange glow over Zhenya’s pale cheeks and Kwon Taekjoo’s dark eyes. They looked at each other for a moment before leaning in for another deep kiss.

What had once been a clear sky now lit up with streaks of red and blue as the final rays of sunlight shone. Zhenya’s broad shoulders and back were bathed in the glow of the setting sun, taking on a warm, rosy hue. The two of them intertwined, rolling together as they went. The hot breaths brushing against Kwon Taekjoo’s lips felt incredibly loving, and even the salty air felt gentle as it touched his skin.

It was all like a sweet, sweet dream.

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Chapter End Notes

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Blue Shangri-La

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•SPANISH DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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His peaceful rest stretched on for some time. Kwon Taekjoo would sleep through the night until he woke up naturally, then get up to eat and enjoy some time on the beach to help with digestion. After a refreshing shower, he would feel drowsy and take a nap wherever he liked, later waking up to read books or watch movies. In the evening, he would drink with Zhenya and get lost in deep conversations that often led effortlessly to sex. Kwon Taekjoo would only manage to pull himself together late in the afternoon.

He wondered if it was really right for him to spend his days so peacefully, especially on an island that wasn't Ajinoki and belonged to someone else. Anxious thoughts and worries would sometimes take over his mind, but over time, they had lessened, largely because Zhenya never left his side, not even for a moment. Kwon Taekjoo felt a strange sense of calm knowing that, with Zhenya by his side, they could overcome any challenge, though things would undoubtedly be more chaotic with him around. No, it wasn't just that they could get through anything... they definitely would.

Whenever he realized how he felt about Zhenya, it surprised him. He had always rejected the idea of having a companion because he enjoyed traveling alone, and that hadn't changed. But what had led him to trust Zhenya so much? These days, it felt far stranger when Zhenya wasn't beside him.

Kwon Taekjoo was lost in thought, staring at the back of Zhenya's head, when Zhenya suddenly turned around. Their eyes met so unexpectedly that Kwon Taekjoo jumped without realizing it. Zhenya tilted his head at Kwon Taekjoo's unusual reaction.

"Taekjoo? What are you thinking so hard about?"

“Ah, nothing. Ready to head back in?”

Kwon Taekjoo quickly stood up and walked toward the water. The waves were at the perfect temperature, so they had been surfing together since the morning. He grabbed the surfboard he had carelessly left in the sand and dove back into the sea. Zhenya stared at him for a moment in confusion before following him.

Kwon Taekjoo lay on his board and paddled forward with strong strokes. The warm water flowed smoothly around him.

How much time had passed?

Suddenly, Kwon Taekjoo noticed a dark silhouette gliding beneath his board. As he pursued it, he could make out the unmistakable shape of a stingray, almost two meters long. Kwon Taekjoo had seen countless sea turtles and stingrays during his stay on the island, so he wasn’t too surprised. Stingrays didn’t try to attack or approach humans.

The stingray, swimming gracefully, slowly approached the surface of the water. Without warning, it flicked its tail, sending a powerful splash of water directly into Kwon Taekjoo’s face. He turned his head to avoid it, but it was already too late.

“Agh.”

Kwon Taekjoo barely managed to stay steady on his board, which wobbled quickly, threatening to tip over at any moment. He didn’t even have time to fix his hair, which now completely covered his face. By the time he regained his composure, the stingray had already swum far away. The smiling face of Zhenya soon appeared in his shaky field of vision.

“Taekjoo, of all the creatures, did a stingray almost drown you? Your hair looks like that seaweed soup the little woman makes us.”

The genuine amusement on Zhenya’s face was obvious. Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t believe he had accepted such a man as a lover. It was almost laughable to think he had ever felt comforted or relied on him. Clearly, he had let himself get carried away with romantic illusions because, in his eyes, Zhenya was still nothing more than a big child.

“Stop smiling and get ready.”

“What, you want to make another bet?”

“Do you really not feel motivated to do anything unless there’s a reward? We’re just here to have fun, idiot. The wave’s coming!” shouted Kwon Taekjoo before quickly standing up on his board.

Zhenya followed closely behind him. Soon, a wave that had formed in the distance lifted them up. The strong buoyancy kept them steady, and they effortlessly maintained their balance on the boards as they reached the crest of the wave. The wind blew pleasantly against their backs, pushing them forward.

They both rode the wave with natural grace, taking turns in the lead. When they were about to collide, they veered off course, exchanging glances and smiles with each other. Kwon Taekjoo had once heard that a lasting relationship required sharing hobbies and interests, and he and Zhenya certainly checked that box. In fact, Kwon Taekjoo wondered if anyone else could keep up with his pace, besides Zhenya.

As they approached the shore, the waves began to weaken. Kwon Taekjoo casually jumped off his board and dove back into the water. They repeated the same ride over and over until the sun began to set.

Kwon Taekjoo had felt as light as a feather while surfing, but stepping out of the water, he felt heavy and sluggish. He tossed his board aside and headed toward a hammock, wrapping himself in a beach towel and stretching out his limbs. Zhenya soon joined him, settling under the hammock and even pulling on the edge of Kwon Taekjoo's towel to dry his face.

At that moment, Zhenya's phone started ringing from the lounge chair. Zhenya simply handed Kwon Taekjoo a bottle of beer as if he hadn't heard it.

Kwon Taekjoo took the bottle in his hands and said, *"It looks like someone's calling you."*

"No need to answer it."

"How can you be so sure without even checking who it is? It could be something important."

"It's because you're here, Taekjoo."

"...What?"

Kwon Taekjoo frowned in confusion. Was Zhenya implying that Kwon Taekjoo was the only thing he considered important? Or was he suggesting that Kwon Taekjoo was the main source of all his worries? Given Zhenya's arrogant nature, the latter seemed more likely.

However, after spending so much time together on this island, the way Zhenya looked at him and spoke felt unexpectedly romantic. Kwon Taekjoo was convinced his brain had turned to mush from being in the water too long.

"But you never know. What if something's wrong with your family?"

"A problem? What kind of problem? If the old man finally kicked the bucket, would that count?"

Zhenya immediately answered his own question.

"No. That wouldn't be a problem—it would be a solution, Taekjoo."

Kwon Taekjoo was speechless for a moment. How could Zhenya consider his father's death not a problem? Did he really have no emotional connection to his family at all?

Then again, it wasn't exactly hard to believe. After all, the Bogdanov family had once gone as far as attempting to sacrifice a six-year-old child to preserve their dignity. Their obsession

with increasing their influence had led them to impose arranged marriages on their children, even to this day. If Zhenya had been viewed his entire life as nothing more than a tool for their ambitions, it made sense that he felt no affection for his own family.

In the heart of Kwon Taekjoo, it weighed heavily that Zhenya had put down his first roots in such a harsh and inhumane land, growing up without the slightest protection or affection. Kwon Taekjoo often criticized Zhenya for lacking basic human qualities, but when he thought about it, Zhenya had been raised in an environment where even a semblance of a normal upbringing was impossible.

He had practically been abandoned by his family, yet they still sought him out whenever they needed something from him. How could his own blood treat him that way? Their behavior was despicable.

It made Zhenya seem almost pitiable again. As Kwon Taekjoo silently ruffled Zhenya's hair, Zhenya gave him a confused look and asked, *"Taekjoo?"*

Kwon Taekjoo continued gently running his fingers through Zhenya's tousled hair. Zhenya's throat seemed to tremble slightly as he calmly accepted the caress. His gaze, fixed on Kwon Taekjoo, ignited with a fiery intensity.

"Hey. I heard that you lock yourself away on Ajinoki Island every time the anniversary of your mother's death comes around."

"Who said that?"

"Does it matter?"

"Uh, I don't know, I never really thought of it that way. I guess it could seem like that to someone looking to confirm their own misguided ideas."

"You don't need to feel so embarrassed. Maybe you haven't realized it, but you could instinctively be driven to isolate yourself. No matter what kind of person your mother was, it's natural to think of her and miss her simply because she was your mother. How do you think the concept of filial piety came about?"

"Embarrassed? Missing someone? Me?"

Zhenya repeated Kwon Taekjoo's words as if he had heard something strange. Had he really never experienced such emotions? Every time Kwon Taekjoo looked at him, he wondered how many basic human feelings could be absent in a person.

Perhaps Zhenya struggled to define or give meaning to his emotions like others could, even if he felt them the same way. There was no other way to explain the naive and innocent devotion he had toward Kwon Taekjoo. Kwon Taekjoo felt a pang of bitterness thinking that Zhenya was nearing 30 and still wrestling with emotions most people learned to name and understand as they grew.

Kwon Taekjoo delicately traced a finger along Zhenya's salt-crusted lashes and said, *"Anyway, next time, take me with you."*

"Are you seriously suggesting we go to my island together? That's new. But, Taekjoo, considering what you do, are you sure you can promise that?"

"I'll do everything I can to make it happen."

"Uh... alright, if you say so. Then, I hope the anniversaries of my relatives' deaths happen more often."

"Do you even hear yourself, idiot?"

Hearing Zhenya's childish remarks, Kwon Taekjoo pinched his cheek. He couldn't believe this was the man he had been pitying and worrying about. He was convinced he was the only person in the world who would care about Zhenya. Kwon Taekjoo was far too soft-hearted when it came to him.

As Kwon Taekjoo let go of Zhenya's cheek, he noticed it had turned bright red... maybe he had pinched too hard. Guilt washed over him as he gently rubbed Zhenya's cheek. Despite this, Zhenya continued to look at Kwon Taekjoo with quiet contentment. In moments like this, when he kept his mouth shut and stayed still, Zhenya was an angel, just as Kwon Taekjoo's mother always called him. Kwon Taekjoo leaned down and pressed a tender kiss to Zhenya's forehead.

Kwon Taekjoo was about to get up from the hammock when Zhenya's hand shot out and grabbed his arm. His face was filled with suspicion.

"Taekjoo. What's going on?"

"What?"

"You're being strangely affectionate again. Don't tell me they've assigned you another mission early."

"Who the hell do you take me for? I was just trying to be a good lover," Kwon Taekjoo grumbled, scolding the skeptical Zhenya while pulling his arm away. It was his way of signaling Zhenya to get up too.

"I'm sweaty from playing all day. Let's soak in some hot water."

Zhenya chuckled and followed Kwon Taekjoo back to their room. Along the way, Zhenya's phone rang constantly, but he ignored it. Kwon Taekjoo couldn't help but feel concerned. After all, persistent calls usually indicated something more urgent.

Kwon Taekjoo woke from his sleep to the sound of a faint noise. However, he kept his eyes closed because he could sense Zhenya's gaze fixed on him from the side. He remained perfectly still, staying calm. In the end, Zhenya gave him a soft kiss on the forehead before getting out of bed. Kwon Taekjoo waited a few moments after Zhenya closed the bedroom

door before opening his eyes. Sitting up, he rubbed the spot on his forehead where Zhenya's lips had touched. After picking up the robe he had carelessly thrown on the floor, he made his way to the door. He didn't exactly suspect Zhenya of anything, but he still wanted to know what he was doing at this hour of the night. The silence around allowed him to catch fragments of Zhenya's voice through the door.

Kwon Taekjoo silenced his breathing and focused intently on Zhenya's voice. It was clear he was talking to someone, and his tone, usually calm and even cold, was now laced with tension.

"Why are you so curious about where I am? Since when have you been so interested in me?"

Who could be so insistent about Zhenya's whereabouts? They were speaking in Russian, which suggested it could be someone from the embassy. But it didn't make sense for them to call at this hour, as it was still only 5 a.m. in Korea.

Moreover, the way Zhenya had asked, *"Since when have you been so interested in me?"* sounded almost like a complaint. It was a familiar retort he often used with Kwon Taekjoo when being sarcastic. In any case, it was obvious from Zhenya's tone that he was speaking with someone who was curious about his recent activities, and that surely limited it to a select group of people who knew him personally. Was it Olga?

"No matter, Bazim."

But an unexpected name came from Zhenya's mouth. Bazim was Zhenya's second older brother, Bazim Vissarionovich Bogdanov. He was one of President Lomonosov's closest advisors and an old friend. Had he been the one bombarding Zhenya's phone with calls during their stay on the island? There was no way his interest was solely out of concern for his younger brother.

Bazim was a politician through and through. He likely prioritized the interests of his nation above all else. More precisely, he would serve the president to secure his position and authority. And to do that, he had to eliminate any threats to the current government—such as factors that might disrupt Russia's diplomatic relations with other countries.

Knowing all this, Kwon Taekjoo could easily discern the true reason behind Bazim's persistent calls. It seemed Bazim had found out about what had happened in Cuba.

Cuba had long been an ally of Russia. The recent terrorist attack had destroyed the Cuban government's main source of funding, and a Russian had stepped in to help a key suspect escape. For Bazim, managing this disaster would have been a challenge in itself, but the fact that the Russian in question was his own brother only made things worse. Kwon Taekjoo could only imagine how awkward Bazim's situation must be.

It wasn't even the first time something like this had happened. Kwon Taekjoo himself was a Korean NIS agent, and Russia was far from an ally to Korea. The things Zhenya had done for Kwon Taekjoo's sake had caused all kinds of problems for his own country. That's why Kwon Taekjoo had always insisted that Zhenya stay out of government affairs. Even if it were true that his own country and family had abandoned him long ago, Zhenya's track

record was anything but simple. Zhenya would receive a call from home like this every time he acted against Russia's interests. There was no doubt he had been monitored and interrogated since he had come to live in Korea.

For the moment, Russia might have considered it safer to keep Zhenya out of the country, but there was no telling when they might demand his return if he continued with his antics. And even if Zhenya chose to ignore the summons, they could always force him back by charging him with various crimes.

Kwon Taekjoo was fully aware of these risks, though he had tried to downplay them as mere attempts to control Zhenya. Despite Zhenya's apparent indifference to his situation, Kwon Taekjoo could no longer ignore the troubling thoughts that weighed on him.

He couldn't stand to see Zhenya continue to isolate himself further.

"There it comes," Zhenya murmured, his gaze lost in the sky.

They had been having a late breakfast when Kwon Taekjoo followed Zhenya's gaze and saw a helicopter approaching in the distance. It was different from the usual supply helicopter. Its peculiar bright yellow facade, resembling an alien's face, was impossible to miss. It had to be Matías Pérez's personal helicopter. Even the last one, which he had taken on his final trip off the island, was a deep purple, much like a beetle. It was clear that Matías had more money than taste.

"Ew, there goes my appetite."

As Kwon Taekjoo grimaced in disgust, Zhenya smiled unexpectedly.

"He's really not your type, huh?"

"Is that even a question, bastard? I've never been interested in anyone with a dick, got it?"

"But now?"

"No, I still stand by that. Try going to an all-boys school, an engineering college, the military, and working in a male-dominated field. You'll get sick of seeing other men's faces all the time."

Kwon Taekjoo shuddered in disgust. Zhenya rested his chin in his hands, seemingly amused. The way his eyes curved with satisfaction was oddly attractive.

"Hello, friends! It's been a while! Did you rest well?"

Matías Pérez's characteristic laugh pierced through the roar of the helicopter blades, echoing in the air. His grand entrance had completely disrupted the table where they were eating. The powerful gusts of wind caused Kwon Taekjoo's coffee to splash onto his hand. Both Zhenya and Kwon Taekjoo glared at Matías Pérez with disdain as he headed towards the helipad, promising to see them later.

“That bastard... Can we shoot his helicopter down?”

“All you have to do is ask.”

Zhenya’s eyes tracked the helicopter with an icy gaze, ready to take Matías down as soon as Kwon Taekjoo gave the go-ahead. Kwon Taekjoo wondered how the two had even met if Zhenya clearly despised the man.

“Seriously, how do you two know each other?”

“Why? Does it bother you?”

Zhenya’s tense expression immediately softened when his gaze shifted to Kwon Taekjoo. Then he shook his head, dismissing his own ridiculous question.

“I swear, you’re obsessed with me.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“And you’re much shyer than you seem. Taekjoo, you don’t need to hide your jealousy. I’ll take it as an adorable gesture.”

Zhenya shrugged, keeping his head held high. Kwon Taekjoo clenched his fists at the sight of Zhenya’s proud posture.

“Ah… It’s pointless trying to talk to you.”

Kwon Taekjoo gave up trying to argue with Zhenya and downed his now cold Americano in one gulp, wiping his hand carelessly on the napkin on his lap.

Just then, Matías Pérez had disembarked from his helicopter and was heading toward the deck. Seemingly unfazed by Zhenya and Kwon Taekjoo’s lack of reaction, he started cheerfully throwing out a series of greetings.

“Friends! You must’ve had quite a wild night, huh? You don’t look so great. How’s the hangover treating you?”

Zhenya stared at Matías with an indifferent expression as he spoke to Kwon Taekjoo.

“He’s just another one of my loyal clients. He’s been envious of my weapons for ages. Not to brag, but my weapons are unmatched in both destructive power and precision. If I wanted, I could even custom-make them or modify them to push physical limits. Sure, they’d be harder to handle, but that’s part of their charm. That bastard’s visited Russia several times just to see me.”

“What a complete freak.”

“The more dangerous something is, the more seductive it becomes. After all, if something is hard to master, it only fuels your desire to conquer it.”

At some point, Zhenya's gaze had shifted back to Kwon Taekjoo. When their eyes met, Zhenya's lips curved into a smile.

Kwon Taekjoo pointed his fork at Zhenya's pretty face and grumbled, *"Yeah, and that's why I say both you and him are freaks."*

Bragging about a weapon's destructive power, calling it seductive, and saying it fueled the desire to conquer... As a regular person, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't understand the logic. Did immense wealth drive people to seek more intense thrills until they lost their minds?

Kwon Taekjoo felt uneasy seeing someone like Matías Pérez pretend to approach them with goodwill. Of course, that wasn't the only reason he disapproved of the man. Matías raised his eyebrows at the prickly looks aimed at him.

"Come on, not even a response? Did I do something to upset you, friends?"

"For people you keep calling 'friends,' you locked us up here and took your sweet time coming back."

"Locked you up? How can you say that? I was just protecting you."

"Oh, is that how you protect people in Mexico? By spying on their private lives?"

"You mean the security cameras? We've been attacked so many times that it's a necessary precaution. You see, we've had too many guests with bad intentions. Since you two are fugitives, I just wanted to keep a closer eye on you… to protect you better, of course."

"So you decided to spy on us in the bedroom?"

"What's the big deal? At the time, you didn't seem to mind. In fact, I'd say you even enjoyed it, didn't you?"

Matías Pérez had watched them in private and showed no sign of shame. Instead, excitement and amusement danced in his eyes at the idea of revealing a side of Kwon Taekjoo he hadn't imagined before. Seeing Matías' gleaming, almost intoxicated eyes made Kwon Taekjoo lose his appetite. Matías had firmly landed in the category of people Kwon Taekjoo couldn't stand. Nothing good would come from continuing to associate with him.

"We need to head back home now."

"What, so soon? Why not stay a bit longer?"

"I'd rather not be a plaything for a perverted host, and I'm not exactly in the mood for any more nonsense."

"I swear, it's all just a misunderstanding, Taekjoo."

At that moment, both Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya's eyes locked onto Matías at the same time. Matías quickly caught on and nodded toward Kwon Taekjoo.

“That’s not your name? I heard Bogdanov calling you that several times last night.”

“Should we just kill him?” Zhenya asked coldly, revealing his anger.

“But then we’d be stuck here forever.”

“We could always escape using his helicopter.”

“And then what? The most important thing is getting back to Korea. We don’t need to kill him yet.”

The two exchanged an unsettling conversation with just a few words. Their eyes remained fixed on Matías the whole time. Unaware of their exchange, Matías commented slyly, **“Are you leaving me out again?”**

Kwon Taekjoo shot a glance at Zhenya, silently urging him to handle the situation. Zhenya complied and began to pressure Matías.

“… Keep your promise, Pérez. You don’t want our deal to turn into a disaster, do you?”

The words were straightforward, but coming from Zhenya, they carried the weight of a threat. And Matías certainly heard it that way too.

“Hmm… I suppose I don’t have a choice, then. It’s been a while since I’ve had guests. It’s a shame to send you off without even sharing a drink together.”

Matías Pérez raised his glass in front of him, then clinked it against Zhenya’s and Kwon Taekjoo’s before letting the topic drop for now.

“I’ll visit Russia one of these days. I hope by then you’ll show me that infamous ‘Anastasia,’ my friend. I’ve been dying to know if she’s as ‘beautiful’ as the rumors say.”

Zhenya flashed a knowing smile, locking eyes with Kwon Taekjoo as he replied, *“If that’s what you’re after, it’s already right in front of you.”*

Though Matías didn’t understand Russian, Zhenya seemed perfectly comfortable saying something so embarrassing in front of him. Kwon Taekjoo shook his head and stood up. Zhenya followed shortly after.

All Matías Pérez could do was watch as the two left him behind once again, while he repeatedly reminded them of their promise.

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Chapter End Notes

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An omen: For better or worse

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•SPANISH DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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"Taekjoo! Hey! Get up quickly. It's already 8."

A familiar voice broke through his deep sleep. Kwon Taekjoo shuddered and opened his eyes with effort. A well-known ceiling appeared in his blurred vision. Then, his mother's face peeked around the corner.

Letting out a long sigh, he slowly sat up. A groan escaped his lips as he ran a hand through his disheveled hair.

"Why didn't you set the alarm? Aren't you going to be late for work?"

His mother handed him a glass of water, her concern evident. He took it without a word and sipped.

"No. I can go in later today."

"Really?"

"Yes. I just got back from a business trip."

"Oh! Is it because it's a foreign embassy that the benefits and treatment are different? Is this job more relaxed compared to the last one?"

"...Yes, something like that."

Saying he was going to wash up, Kwon Taekjoo slipped away to the bathroom. Lying so blatantly to his mother made him feel guilty. He couldn't look into her the eyes and lie with

ease. If his mother had seen the state Kwon Taekjoo was in when he returned from Cuba, all his lies would have been exposed. But fortunately, his minor wounds had healed on the way back to Korea. He had a higher resistance and faster recovery than most, which was a stroke of luck.

It had already been four days since he returned home. Zhenya said he was going to Russia for a while to finalize a deal with Matías. Thanks to that, he could sleep without interruptions.

Even so, his reflection in the bathroom mirror showed a tired face. He hadn't rested properly due to being with Zhenya until just before his return.

Before, he was so confident in his stamina that he could jump straight into the next mission right after completing one. But now, after spending days and nights with his lover, he wondered if this was what aging felt like—like an athlete hitting a curve.

Yawning deeply, he grabbed his toothbrush. As he brushed without much thought, memories of the last few days flashed before him like a magic lantern.

During a late night, Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya boarded a prepared helicopter and left Matías Island. The helicopter landed on a large ship, which they were told was a cargo vessel that had departed from Panama, passed through Mexico, and was headed to Busan. At the time of landing, the ship had left the port city of Manzanillo on Mexico's west coast and was crossing the Pacific.

From there, a long 17-day journey to Busan began. The ship's captain and crew believed that Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya were security guards sent by an international logistics company. Thanks to this, they didn't have to participate in the ship's tedious tasks. Even when they walked around armed, no one questioned them.

Their intimidating appearance also helped ward off interference or interest from others. The crew, regardless of nationality or age, avoided Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya. During meals, if they appeared, the others quickly gave up their seats. Beyond their intimidating presence, having security guards aboard made the crew uncomfortable.

The usual disputes that arise on long sea voyages weren't their concern. The sailors would argue and become noisy, but the situation never lasted long. When Kwon Taekjoo or Zhenya appeared, everyone dispersed with uncomfortable expressions, as if nothing had happened.

Zhenya would bang on the wall in frustration whenever he heard loud noises outside. Immediately, the entire ship fell silent. Most of the time, Zhenya and him were having sex, so it was understandable. If it had been a disruption to his sleep, who knows what he might have done in self-defense. It seemed like a miracle that they made it back to Korea without any major incidents.

Thanks to prior notice to the National Intelligence Service, they didn't have to go through immigration procedures at the port of Busan. Although it caused a bit of a stir, they were granted a few days of vacation as a reward for completing the mission. Everything went surprisingly smooth, almost as if it was an illusion. Without Zhenya's intervention, none of

this would have been possible. The days spent on an unknown island in Mexico now felt like a distant dream.

After gathering his thoughts and finishing his shower, he stepped out of the bathroom. His mother had already prepared breakfast. He couldn't refuse and sat down quietly. The table was filled with more than ten different side dishes. A well-cooked red pepper paste stew immediately awakened his appetite.

"Why did you prepare so much food this early in the morning?"

"How much must you have suffered, living abroad for almost a month without being able to eat Korean food? Did you eat well? You've only been sleeping since you got home, and your face is so pale I can hardly stand it."

"Mother, please. Why does a man need a pretty face?"

"Your face, which isn't much use anyway, looks even more gaunt, boy. Should I prepare some medicine for you?"

"For what? The food you make is the best remedy."

As always, he brushed off his mother's concerns with a smile. She, with a reproachful look, placed a well-cooked piece of fish on Kwon Taekjoo's rice. In silence, he took a big spoonful of rice and brought it to his mouth. The freshly cooked rice and salty fish blended perfectly. After taking a spoonful of the red pepper paste stew, his unsettled stomach immediately calmed down.

"This is delicious. Mother, you should eat too."

"I already had something earlier."

"Come on, don't just eat a little."

"You'll understand when you get older. Eating three meals a day isn't as easy to digest."

His mother replied while placing a piece of jangjorim on his plate. This time, the jangjorim didn't have the green peppers she usually included. Zhenya, who had once tried one of those peppers on Kwon Taekjoo's recommendation, had choked severely, leading to this change. That had been over a year ago. Somehow, Zhenya had integrated too naturally into Kwon Taekjoo's daily life.

"This jangjorim. The ambassador liked it a lot too."

Lost in thought, he was startled by his mother's words. He quickly covered his mouth with the back of his hand to stifle a cough. His mother, unaware of the reason, offered him a glass of water and told him to eat more slowly. Taking advantage of the moment, she asked about Zhenya.

"I wonder if the ambassador is doing well after his long trip. When will he return?"

“I don’t know. When he finishes his business.”

“What? You don’t know your boss’s schedule as his assistant?”

“He said it was personal business. What can I do? Investigate his private life?”

“A subordinate should be able to understand things without being told.”

He pursed his lips at his mother’s scolding. Although he had always hated the military mentality of his grandfather and father, his mother wasn’t much different. He wasn’t sure if it was out of habit or because she had a special fondness for Zhenya and always defended him.

“By the way, will the ambassador spend his birthday in Russia?”

He paused at his mother’s comment. Then, he glanced at the desk calendar in the corner of the table. The calendar had already turned to August. Exactly one week remained until Zhenya’s birthday.

“Don’t you think he’ll be back before then? He said he’d come soon.”

“Really? Then, should I prepare a special meal for the ambassador’s birthday?”

“You, mother? Wouldn’t it be enough to just buy him a cake?”

“Oh no, that wouldn’t be proper. The ambassador is all alone in such a distant place; don’t you think he’d feel very lonely on his birthday? We’ve shared so much until now; the right thing to do is offer him a warm meal.”

“This is unbelievable. Even on regular days, without any reason, you’d call Zhenya to invite him for lunch or tea. And now, just because it’s his birthday, it seems you need an excuse… Well, I’ll ask him.”

“Yes, just make sure to tell him not to feel pressured.”

“That guy is not the type to feel pressured easily. Haven’t you noticed that by now?”

“What? You refer to him as ‘that’ and ‘that guy’ in front of the ambassador? Are you going to keep being so disrespectful?”

“No, he’s not here right now…”

“If you speak that way when he’s not around, it will become a habit.”

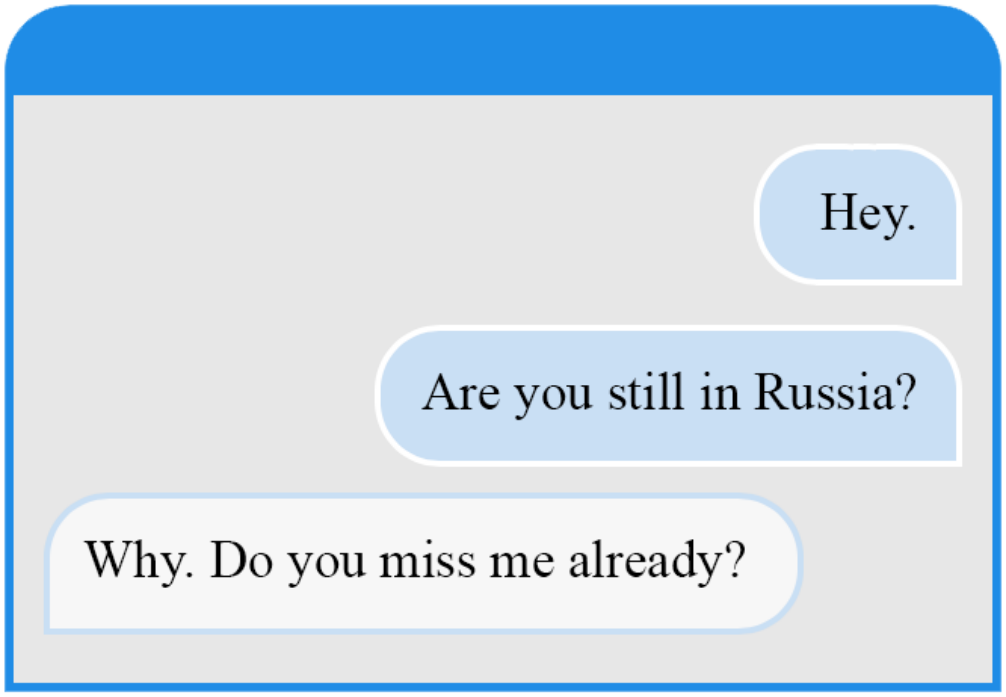
As always, Kwon Taekjoo’s mother defended Zhenya. She claimed she was doing it for the sake of her only son, but Kwon wondered if she would feel the same way if she knew how Zhenya treated him. Ignorance truly was bliss. Kwon mumbled an apology and kept eating.

Now that he thought about it, he hadn’t heard from Zhenya in the past four days. He thought he had made his point clear last time, but it seemed Zhenya had already forgotten. They say

no news is good news, but that didn't apply to him. It looked like Kwon would have to reach out first.

After finishing his meal, Kwon went to his room and grabbed his phone. Although he had hoped for it, there were no missed calls from Zhenya. Could something have happened again in Russia? Maybe his father had finally caught him to arrange an engagement, or perhaps he'd been banned from leaving the country for helping Kwon in Cuba.

Zhenya always made him worry. Damn it, Kwon thought, as he pressed the call button. But before it could ring, he changed his mind and decided to send him a message instead.



Surprisingly, the response arrived immediately. That meant Zhenya could still use all ten fingers. Bastard.

You said you'd be here soon.
Yes. Soon.
When is 'soon'?
Taekjoo. What's going on? Asking all these questions.
You're doing some adorable things, aren't you?

He could clearly imagine that guy's smiling face. He was about to reply with "who" when an incoming call window appeared above the message. It was a call from headquarters.

Kwon Taekjoo took a deep breath in front of the director's office door. Reporting to the superiors was the final step in completing the operation. Although he almost always failed, would he have to write another report this time? Foreseeing the obvious outcome, he knocked on the door.

"Come in."

Director Kwak's voice was no different than usual. Even so, Kwon let out a long sigh. After clearing his throat, he opened the door and stepped inside. Director Kwak set aside the documents he was reviewing and looked at him. It was hard to guess his thoughts just from his expression.

If the previous boss, Mr. Lim, was a sly fox, Director Kwak was more like a mole. He would reflect silently and respond sensitively. As a superior, he was a more difficult type to deal

with. Kwon bowed and stood in front of his desk.

“Did you call me?”

“Yes. Did you rest well?”

“Yes, thanks to your consideration.”

“Did you get hurt anywhere?”

“As you can see, I’m perfectly fine.”

“You don’t know how to complain, do you?”

“I wouldn’t change anything, even if I could. I learned that while working at the National Intelligence Agency.”

“Don’t you think that’s why you take on more work than others?”

“What can a public servant do? If the higher-ups order it, it must be done.”

Director Kwak laughed and praised Kwon Taekjoo’s accomplishments.

“Anyway, you’ve worked hard. Even though we considered the possibility of American intervention, we didn’t expect them to be so stubborn. We almost lost a valuable talent. It seems they have some sense of shame, as they haven’t filed any complaints regarding this incident.”

“What basis would they have to complain? I merely responded to a preemptive attack to protect my right to survive.”

“Yes, discussing justifications is endless. The United States is denying that the commotion that night was planned. They claim it was the action of a PMC acting outside government control, solely for its own interests. In Cuba, they are also trying to frame the attack as a deviation by international mercenaries. It doesn’t suit them for it to be known that the target of the attack wasn’t just innocent civilians. If ‘Electric Hammer’ comes to light, they will only face criticism. They also don’t want a full-scale war with the United States.”

The sacrifice of an individual in the name of national interest was always easily concealed. This time was no different. As a result, both the Cuban hackers and the American mercenaries were used and then discarded. Perhaps Kwon Taekjoo’s fate wouldn’t be different.

“Regardless, thanks to your covert operations, we were able to recover the data safely. The damage from the leak wasn’t too severe, and all the institutions and companies that were hacked have stopped receiving ransom demands from the crackers. Of course, the young hackers also survived, so it’s possible that attacks from Cuba will resume once things calm down.

But we’ve reinforced national security systems, so it won’t be as easy as before.”

“… ‘Young’ hackers?”

“Ah, you didn’t have time to hear the details. The hackers of ‘Electric Hammer’ were all their children. From the eldest, who was believed to be dead, to the second, who was reported missing, and the youngest, who suffers from a congenital lung disease.”

“All three?”

“Yes. Isn’t it surprising? How such ordinary parents had such genius children one after another. I don’t know how the Cuban government discovered their usefulness, but it seems they’ve kept the two brothers locked in a basement, exploiting the profits they made from their hacking. They deceived them with promises to cure the younger one’s illness or constantly pressured them with soldiers as guards.”

Kwon Taekjoo remembered the young hacker he had found in the basement and the girl with the nasal tubes. He assumed the girl was not involved in any crimes. Therefore, when he dispersed the sleeping gas, he made sure to avoid the nasal tubes, fearing it could endanger her. Was it an unnecessary act? Now that he thought about it, an innocent girl shouldn’t have to know about the existence of that underground room.

The enemies Kwon Taekjoo encountered in the field often exceeded his expectations. It was not uncommon for the target to be a woman, an elderly person, or, as in this case, a minor. In those moments, he always prioritized his mission and duty. For the good of the country and to prevent greater harm, he had to rationalize it that way to maintain his composure.

Was this time any different? No, it wasn’t. Still, Kwon Taekjoo displayed unnecessary compassion. Of course, the objective of this operation was to recover the leaked data safely. Although an encounter with the hackers was unavoidable during the process, it wasn’t necessary to eliminate them. In fact, the brothers Kwon Taekjoo saved from certain death were not dangerous terrorists and did not offer fierce resistance. Keeping them alive posed no significant threat to national security. So why did he still feel uncomfortable? Kwon Taekjoo questioned himself repeatedly, trying to understand the source of his unease.

"In the data you recovered this time, we found some rather interesting information."

Director Kwak changed the subject.

"It seems that 'Electric Hammer' has been more active than we thought. Not just in our country, but also in Thailand, Russia, China, North Korea, and Japan. When we decrypted the secured data from the field, we found high-level information, even state secrets. We even detected unusual movements in North Korea that not even the National Intelligence Agency had identified."

Kwon Taekjoo looked at the tablet Director Kwak was showing him. The screen was filled with the photo of a middle-aged man. Was he Korean? Or someone from the North Korean side? He glanced back at Director Kwak, seeking an explanation.

"Park Jung-ho, a North Korean biologist. He has spent his entire life researching the ecology and microorganisms of Mount Baekdu. It is said that he will travel to Vladivostok at the end

of this month as a visiting researcher."

"That's just a cover. What's the real purpose?"

"Well, we're not entirely sure yet. We can only speculate. It seems that when Park Jung-ho arrives in Vladivostok, he will hold secret meetings with 'Rostec,' Russia's largest defense company, and 'Pharmzashita,' a state-owned pharmaceutical company. 'Rostec' is dedicated to the research and development of military technology, and 'Pharmzashita' operates under the Russian Agency of Medical Biology. Doesn't that sound suspicious? It's said that agents from North Korea's State Security Ministry will accompany Park Jung-ho at all times, particularly this man."

Director Kwak swiped the tablet screen. A photo appeared of a man in a North Korean military uniform. From the insignias on his cap and the medals covering his chest, he seemed to be a high-ranking officer.

"Who is he?"

"Shim Young-il. Head of Operations for North Korea's General Staff. So, what do you think? Starting to see the bigger picture?"

A North Korean biologist secretly meeting with a state-owned Russian pharmaceutical company. The company in question, 'Pharmzashita,' has recently garnered international attention for purchasing large quantities of potassium iodide, which helps reduce the body's absorption of radiation. This suggests possible Russian nuclear tests. Like most state-owned enterprises, 'Pharmzashita' follows government orders, so the meeting between them and the North Korean biologist can be seen as a move by the Kremlin. Moreover, 'Rostec,' which develops Russian military technology, and a high-ranking North Korean military officer will also be present. Given that both countries have long been military allies, this is not a good sign.

It seemed this was the reason Director Kwak had summoned Kwon Taekjoo. Taekjoo got straight to the point to confirm his suspicions.

"So, you want me to go to Vladivostok and find out what they're discussing?"

Director Kwak smiled without answering. It was a knowing smile.

"Before that, there's something we need to clarify. The Russian ambassador to South Korea, Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov."

The unexpected name from Director Kwak's mouth made Kwon Taekjoo tense, though he tried to maintain his composure.

"Yes, go on."

"As you know, the Bogdanov family is one of the most influential in Russia. It's no exaggeration to say they are involved in everything Russia does. The Russian ambassador's brother, Bazim Vissarionovich Bogdanov, who is one of the president's closest advisors, is

also an advisor to 'Rostec.' Additionally, the hotel where the North Korean officials will be staying during their visit to Russia is operated by his family."

Kwon Taekjoo kept his mouth shut. There wasn't much to argue about when it came to that family. His only concern was whether Zhenya knew anything about the secret meeting or if he was somehow involved.

"They say the Russian ambassador also showed up during the operation in Cuba, didn't he?"

Director Kwak asked suddenly. Although his tone was mild, it was still a reprimand. The involvement of a foreign diplomat in a secret operation conducted by the National Intelligence Agency was always a potential problem. In fact, Zhenya had gotten involved more than once, and it seemed he had been under observation for some time.

"I don't understand why he keeps helping you. I find it hard to accept your previous explanation that he does it purely out of personal friendship or goodwill. Although his involvement has aligned with our interests so far, I'm honestly not pleased at all. If things escalate, they could spiral out of control, especially in diplomatic matters. Moreover, this case cannot be dismissed as mere coincidence. He's a direct participant. Do you understand?"

Kwon Taekjoo had never shared work-related information with Zhenya. It was always Zhenya who found out and meddled on his own.

Still, it wasn't something Taekjoo could simply resent. After all, it was true that he had benefited from Zhenya's help, and not long ago, he had felt relieved to see Zhenya come to his rescue. Kwon Taekjoo had grown used to Zhenya suddenly showing up during his missions. No, he had become dependent on him, even though Zhenya wasn't his partner. He had let his guard down, relying on him, despite knowing that if he were accused of conspiring with a Russian diplomat and leaking national secrets, there would be no way out. Not just for him, but for Zhenya as well—they would both be in danger.

Kwon Taekjoo let out a long sigh and clenched his fists.

"I understand what you're saying. I'll make sure he doesn't interfere in official matters again. Don't worry."

"Can I trust that?"

"Yes."

"I'm sure you'll handle it well, but make sure to always act within the limits we can manage. The operation in Cuba was quite dangerous."

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"It's fine. You can go for today. I'll call you again when we have more details about the operation."

"Alright, then."

Kwon Taekjoo bowed and left. He kept a poker face the entire time, but as soon as he closed the director's office door, he let out a deep sigh. His chest felt unbearably tight.

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Chapter End Notes

Support the author by purchasing the novel on Ridibooks.

An omen: For better or worse

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•SPANISH DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Kwon Taekjoo was well aware of Zhenya's family. He knew exactly how they had acquired their current wealth and power. Zhenya had also contributed to expanding his family's influence. Even so, Taekjoo accepted him. He didn't believe that Zhenya had completely changed.

Zhenya kept some distance from his family, and the wrongdoings of the Bogdanov family didn't directly affect Kwon Taekjoo's interests, so he decided to ignore them. More clearly, Taekjoo simply didn't have time to dwell on such matters. In extreme situations, he was swept up by emotions, as if caught in a storm. This was the first time he had made a decision based on his heart rather than his head. Was it reckless?

Despite the current concerns, the secret meeting between North Korea and Russia might amount to nothing. It could end with just an exchange of new information between the two countries. If their agreement didn't threaten South Korea's security, Taekjoo would have no reason to feel uneasy.

However, he couldn't shake that discomfort. As long as he kept Zhenya close, similar issues were bound to repeat themselves. While Kwon Taekjoo continued to work for South Korea and Zhenya remained rooted in Russia, there was no escaping this cycle. It wasn't as if he hadn't foreseen it. Knowing all this, he had accepted it, but why did he still feel so restless?

"Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov, the Russian ambassador to South Korea?"

From the beginning, Taekjoo should never have let headquarters find out about him. Nor should he have allowed them to know that Zhenya was helping him. Even though Zhenya

always meddled in his own way, this was a covert operation. No one else should have been exposed to it.

Still, Kwon Taekjoo got involved with him recklessly, excusing himself with the notion that he couldn't stop him. Fueled by the faint belief that Zhenya wouldn't betray him, he certainly deserved the reprimand from Director Kwak.

Thinking about Zhenya, Taekjoo knew he shouldn't let him continue acting on his behalf. The more involved Zhenya became in his affairs, the harder Zhenya's situation would become. He had to be aware of this.

"Come on, Kwon Taekjoo, get a grip. You can't lose your mind over a romance."

He shook his head irritably, trying to calm his frustration. At that moment, he heard a voice calling him from behind.

"Sunbae!"

Kwon Taekjoo turned and saw Yoon Jongwoo at the end of the hallway, waving his arm. Taekjoo fully turned toward him as Yoon Jongwoo quickly ran over.

"What were you thinking about so deeply? I've been calling you, and you didn't hear me."

"Really? Sorry."

"The director called for you, right? Did you just come from seeing him?"

"Yes."

"Did he give you a hard time?"

"Do you think I'm always getting scolded?"

"Then why do you look so bad? You said you only slept during your break. Still haven't recovered? No one can beat time, not even you, Sunbae."

"What do you mean I can't beat time, idiot?"

Kwon Taekjoo made a motion as if he were going to kick Yoon Jongwoo in the rear. Jongwoo exaggerated his movements, dodging and playing along. After dodging back and forth, Jongwoo finally gave up and got caught in a headlock. After horsing around for a while, Taekjoo forgot what he had been thinking so deeply about.

"Ah, Sunbae. Please be more careful. I think you twisted my neck."

"A man whining."

"And you, who can snap the neck of any big guy with a single blow, say that? Now, you really sound like yourself, being so hard on others."

“You sure talk a lot now that you’ve got more experience. Your tongue’s gotten pretty loose.”

“You always scold me when you’re feeling guilty. After all this time, were you going to leave without seeing me?”

“Why should I see your face all the time?”

“Wow, that’s harsh. So, saying I’m the only one you can trust was just lip service? You only come to me when you need something.”

“Why are you complaining so much today? Did the heat get to you?”

Faced with the constant teasing, Yoon Jongwoo expressed his discontent with a visibly hurt expression.

“I was worried. Right after hearing the explosion, communication was cut, and I thought something really bad had happened.”

“I’m not going down that easily.”

“But you were out of contact for two days. They said there were no Asians among the mercenaries captured alive at the scene. How could I not be concerned?”

“That was for good reason…”

He tried to explain but stopped himself. The explosion had destroyed his communication equipment, leaving him with no way to contact headquarters. The problem was that instead of finding another way to communicate, he had spent those two days with Zhenya. Of course, if Zhenya hadn’t shown up, he would have been arrested by Cuban police or killed on the spot, and he never would have been able to contact anyone.

“…Never mind. It’s my karma, my fate.”

“Don’t do something so reckless again. You don’t have ten lives, so try to be more careful.”

Taekjoo nodded vaguely and patted Yoon Jongwoo on the shoulder. Jongwoo, who had been scolding him fervently, quickly calmed down. It was amusing and kind of adorable how quickly he flared up and then cooled down.

“You act like a wife.”

Taekjoo laughed and ruffled Jongwoo’s hair roughly. Jongwoo, who had been sighing openly, suddenly stopped and began looking around. Taekjoo also looked around.

“What’s going on? Is something happening?”

“No, just in case.”

“Just in case what?”

“No matter how crazy that Russian is, he couldn’t be spying on the National Intelligence Service, right?”

“Why’d you bring him up all of a sudden?”

“He looks at me like he wants to kill me just because I touch you. With those sharp eyes, it seems like he could slice someone to pieces.”

"But he hasn't hurt you, has he? Don't be so dramatic."

"It's just that he's so gentle with you, so you don't know how terrifying he can be. Couldn't you tell him not to contact me?"

"He reaches out to you? Seems like he wants to be your friend."

"No, no, I don't want that!"

"Then tell him yourself."

"Are you trying to get me killed?"

"If you can't, then just befriend him. You two seem to get along."

Yoon Jongwoo gritted his teeth and swallowed hard, his fists trembling visibly. Kwon Taekjoo chuckled, unfazed. "You think that guy listens to me?"

"If it weren't for you, Sunbae, I..."

"I haven't said a word, right?"

"Can I read minds now?"

"Don't lie."

Yoon Jongwoo shot Kwon Taekjoo, who was laughing, a look of disdain. "Are you sure nothing's wrong?"

"Why does something always have to be wrong? Anyway, let's grab a drink. It's been a while."

"Now? I'm still on my shift."

"Just tell them you're going out for work. If there's any trouble, I'll cover for you."

"Cover for me? Sounds like we'll end up writing a report together."

"Don't you trust your Sunbae? I can protect you. Come on."

Kwon Taekjoo wrapped his arm around Yoon Jongwoo's neck and started walking down the hallway. Yoon Jongwoo struggled for a moment, asking to be released, but quickly gave up

and asked what he was going to buy him. After all, they were close colleagues who got along well.

"You know you're a terrible boss, right, Sunbae?" Yoon Jongwoo muttered as he stretched. It had been a while since they'd caught up, and they'd likely discuss work, so instead of heading to a restaurant, they went to Yoon Jongwoo's apartment.

Yoon Jongwoo's place, which Taekjoo hadn't visited in a long time, hadn't changed at all. It was a small two-bedroom apartment facing east, meaning it didn't get much sunlight. The blinds were closed, leaving the place dim even during the day. Clothes were scattered haphazardly on chairs, coat racks, and workout equipment. The area around the computer was cluttered with random stuff, except for the small space right in front of the chair. Taekjoo wondered how he lived and ate in such a mess.

As Taekjoo tossed some clothes into the laundry basket, he remarked, "What a mess." Only then did they manage to clear enough space to sit across from each other. As Yoon Jongwoo prepared the grill, he began grumbling.

"'A mess', you say? Come on! I've told you a thousand times before. You always barge into my personal space and time without any notice. You even take my stuff!"

"Hey, I may be many things, but I've never tried to take anything from you, right?"

"Did you forget the last time you used my game character without permission? And you treat my car like a taxi. And now this. You said you'd treat me to something nice, so why are we here? You don't really think of your employee as your servant, do you?"

"Don't be so dramatic. Besides, didn't I bring something nice?"

Kwon Taekjoo gestured toward the bags he'd set on the table. On the way, they had stopped at the nearby market and bought sashimi and beef—foods Yoon Jongwoo enjoyed and perfect for pairing with drinks. Even the sashimi and meat cuts had been handpicked by Yoon Jongwoo, so his sudden complaints seemed to have another cause. The way his eyes drifted off proved it.

"You're just trying to avoid getting scolded," Taekjoo teased. "So, you little brat, how about living a bit tidier? Is this a pigsty or a home? Air the place out morning and night. When was the last time you did laundry? It's a miracle you haven't gotten sick living and eating in here. That's why you're always weak, right?"

It wasn't hard to see through Yoon Jongwoo's shallow excuses. Faced with the barrage of scolding, Jongwoo whined, "Why are you lecturing me when I didn't even invite you?"

"Don't you know intervention is a form of care? You should be grateful that a superior like me is looking out for you."

"Unwanted attention is violence. Talking to you feels like I'm back in the military."

Yoon Jongwoo grumbled in a defeated tone, continuing his complaints as they set the table.

"They say having a boss favored by the higher-ups is a mistake. I think I messed up from the start."

"You think I'm favored? I don't think anyone in the office has written more disciplinary reports than I have."

"Is that something to be proud of? That makes it even worse. If you're loyal to the higher-ups, then be fully loyal. But you always do things your own way. It's not just about achieving the goal. I've been scolded several times for helping you."

"I didn't get scolded this time."

"Is that the face of someone who didn't get scolded?"

"What's wrong with my face?"

"You're always worried, which isn't like you."

Taekjoo instinctively rubbed his face. Could it be that even someone as oblivious as Yoon Jongwoo had noticed his concern? He couldn't deny that, after being warned by Director Kwak about Zhenya's involvement, he had been on edge. But it wasn't just that weighing on him.

Meanwhile, Jongwoo had divided the grill into two sections, grilling the meat and boiling water for instant noodles. He quickly prepared the alcohol, sashimi, and a few side dishes. And he hadn't stopped talking the whole time. It seemed he had a lot to vent.

"Honestly, aren't you feeling overwhelmed, Sunbae? Trying to do the work of multiple people just leaves you with no time and in more danger. You're always running around—why won't you reinforce the team?"

"Because having more people wouldn't change anything."

"How wouldn't it change anything? Your workload would lighten significantly. At least you'd have someone to cover for you."

"On the contrary, having to look after the team members and bail them out could make things harder. Plus, who could keep up with my pace?"

"Ugh… That pace is the problem. If you were just a workaholic and a perfectionist, no one would say anything. But you make everyone around you follow that same pace, and that's why they complain. You even break rules and act out of line. No one says it out loud, but no one wants to have your back."

"That's fine. As long as I have you, I'm good."

"I'm *not* good!"

"That hurts, kid. How many times have I bought you food? Who do you think stocks your fridge with side dishes?"

Unable to find a proper response, Yoon Jongwoo clenched his fists. He bit his lower lip in frustration, and his body trembled. Meanwhile, Kwon Taekjoo placed some grilled meat on his plate. Yoon Jongwoo, still looking displeased, ate the meat diligently.

“What I’m saying is, take it easy, Sunbae. Your goal isn’t to die in the line of duty.”

Kwon Taekjoo nodded absentmindedly as he opened a bottle of soju. When he tilted the bottle towards Yoon Jongwoo, Jongwoo quickly raised his glass. First, Taekjoo poured for him, then for himself. After a brief pause, Yoon Jongwoo said, “Cheers,” and lightly clinked their glasses. He smiled and drank his soju in one gulp. It didn’t hit him much. Maybe it was because he had been drinking stronger stuff with Zhenya lately.

He poured himself another glass and downed it immediately. As he fiddled with his empty glass, Yoon Jongwoo stared at him intently. From experience, he seemed to know that Taekjoo did this when he had a lot on his mind.

"Jongwoo, you know, right? I've been running non-stop."

"Of course. You were like a moth, all work, no tears."

"When I worked, I never thought of anything else. I didn’t care if the enemy during a mission was a man, woman, elderly, or child. Overcoming extreme, unexpected situations and finally getting what I wanted gave me an incredible rush. It was a feeling I'd never experienced before, and maybe that's why I became addicted to it so fast. Sometimes, doing nothing and just resting felt like hell. That’s why I thought this job was my calling."

“Wow… If that’s the case, it really sounds like it is, right?”

"Maybe it’s because I'm getting older, as you said. More and more, random thoughts slip into my work. Sometimes I hesitate to pull the trigger, and my mindset seems to have shifted a bit."

Yoon Jongwoo, in the middle of preparing a large bite, paused. Processing the context, he cautiously asked, “Sunbae, did something happen in Cuba?”

Kwon Taekjoo shook his head slightly and poured himself another drink. Then, he toyed with the empty glass for quite a while, seemingly lost in thought.

"It's not just that it was a problem at the time, but when I think about it, it's been a long time since I lost my initial motivation."

Yoon Jongwoo, tilting his head, popped a piece of meat into his mouth. It was hard for him to understand what part of Kwon Taekjoo had changed. As far as he knew, Taekjoo had never failed in his duties. His recent activities weren't any different from before. In fact, Jongwoo thought it would be good if he took things a little slower.

As he glanced over at him, Kwon Taekjoo remained deep in thought, downing drink after drink. Something was clearly troubling him, but he wasn’t sharing it openly, making it hard

for Jongwoo to ask directly. Instead, Jongwoo quietly served the instant noodles, which were just right.

"You're going to mess up your stomach. Eat something too. Do you think your body is made of iron forever?"

For some reason, Kwon Taekjoo's gaze was fixed on the noodles. He stared at them intensely but didn't seem inclined to eat them, which was strange.

Finally, Taekjoo broke the silence.

"What would you do if two things you care about deeply couldn't coexist?"

"Is this about your mother?"

"Huh? My mother?"

"Your mother wants you to have stability, and you feel like this job is your calling. Isn't that what's been bothering you?"

Suddenly, he felt caught off guard. It wasn't that he didn't know about his mother's concerns. He was aware of them, but he didn't think about her while he was working.

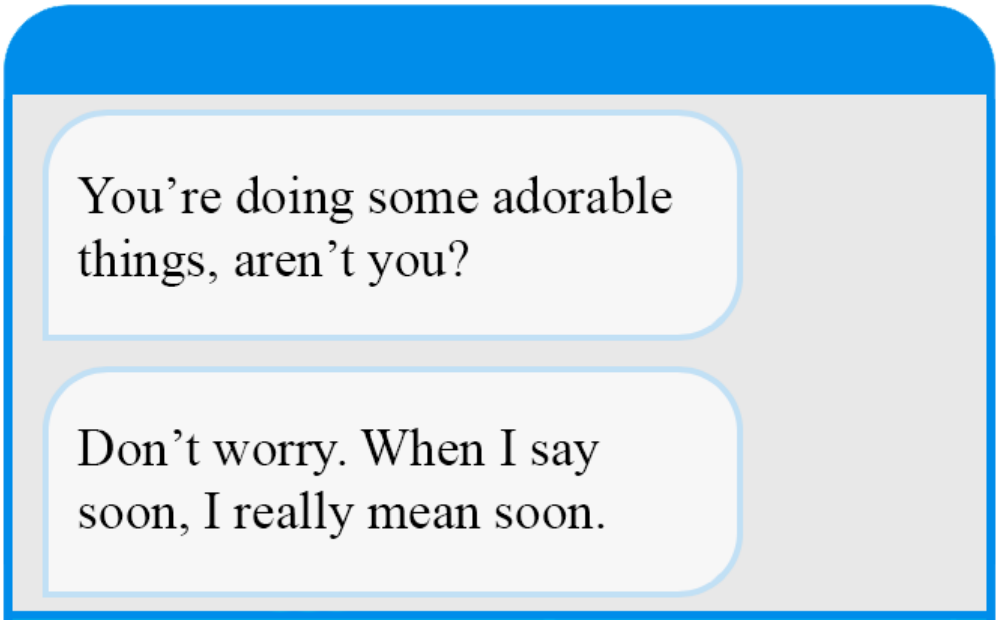
In reality, the affection and sense of duty he felt toward his mother had never held him back before. He justified it by thinking that what he did was for the good of the country and that it benefited more people, so it had to take priority. Even when he lied to his mother to reassure her, he didn't feel guilty.

But now? Why was it different with Zhenya?

Though the situation wasn't immediate, Taekjoo had a growing sense that, at some point, he would have to choose between Zhenya and his work. Director Kwak's warning had stirred that vague unease. If the time came to make that choice, what decision would Kwon Taekjoo make? Just thinking about something that hadn't even happened yet filled him with increasing anxiety.

The reunion continued late into the night. Yoon Jongwoo, who had been venting about the difficulties of work, began repeating himself before eventually passing out, clutching an empty bottle. Taekjoo laid him down on the floor with a pillow and sat on the bed, trying to calm his chaotic mind. Suddenly, he felt the urge to smoke, but he didn't have any cigarettes. Yoon Jongwoo didn't smoke either. It seemed he had gotten used to smoking Zhenya's cigars.

"Should I head home? I could stop by the convenience store and buy a pack of cigarettes." But Taekjoo only thought about it, without moving. With nothing else to do, he started checking his phone.



Kwon Taekjoo looked at the last message he had exchanged with Zhenya. Their conversation had abruptly ended due to a call from headquarters. "Will he come tomorrow? Will he come before I get assigned a new mission?" There were things Taekjoo needed to discuss with him sincerely before that. Perhaps that was why he felt so anxious.

It was 11 p.m. If Zhenya was in Moscow, it would be around 5 p.m. there. Without thinking much, Kwon Taekjoo pressed the call button. The long ringtone kept going, almost about to cut off but never quite doing so. He could have given up, but he waited stubbornly. The sound of the ringing echoed in the silence, even beyond the phone.

How long had it been? Suddenly, the ringing stopped, and he heard the voice he had been waiting for.

[Taekjoo?]

[You're late.]

Taekjoo threw Zhenya’s usual reprimand back at him. Catching the tone, Zhenya let out a low laugh.

[You've been drinking.]

[What, can you smell the alcohol?]

[I told you. I can know anything about you.]

[You’re not very convincing. You claim to know everything, yet you haven't shown up.]

[Have you had a lot to drink? It's not like you to complain like this.]

He laughed, his throat vibrating, as if in a good mood. Zhenya always brightened up at a word, a look, or a gesture from Kwon Taekjoo, but Taekjoo couldn’t understand why he was so hard to reach. Suddenly, he realized how his exes must have felt when they broke up. The

breakups were always one-sided, and each time, they blamed him for his indifference. You reap what you sow, and now it seemed he was reaping the same.

[Complaining? You always interpret things your way.]

Taekjoo muttered in discontent. Meanwhile, Zhenya's laughter continued, as if watching a cute animal or a child being mischievous. Taekjoo couldn't understand how he could be so carefree without knowing what was on his mind, and it only made him angrier.

[Did you break a finger? Why do I always have to be the one to contact you first, just for you to respond reluctantly?]

[Hmm... I don't get it. You always disappear when you're working, and when we're together, you tell me to keep my distance. But now that we're apart, you miss me? Can't stand being alone for even a moment?]

Taekjoo could imagine Zhenya's nose held high with pride, his broad shoulders and arrogant attitude. He couldn't help but let out a sigh. Zhenya laughed openly, then added in a voice still full of laughter.

[Yes, Taekjoo. Keep complaining like that.]

A sigh could be heard. Zhenya seemed to be somewhere outside.

[...Damn bastard. Stop laughing and come quickly. I have something to tell you.]

[Sounds like you do. You're doing things you don't usually do.]

Zhenya seemed to have leaned back comfortably.

[If I come, you'll have to explain why you've been at that idiot's house until this hour.]

[What? Where the hell are you...?]

Taekjoo shot upright and looked around. He now understood why Zhenya was so relaxed; it seemed like he could see in real-time where he was and what he was doing. Always watching every move, Zhenya had no curiosity or concern. Even when Taekjoo was on duty, Zhenya watched him and would show up unexpectedly. Taekjoo didn't know where to begin to correct this, and it felt overwhelming.

[Ah, forget it. Arguing with a bastard like you is a waste of time. I'm hanging up.]

[See you soon.]

Zhenya hung up, smiling all the way to the end. The room returned to silence, and the sound of Yoon Jongwoo's breathing became more prominent.

With the phone still in hand, Kwon Taekjoo leaned his head back and let out a deep sigh. His mind was as tangled as a ball of yarn.

"...That said, I should go. Seems like my Zainka is quite upset about being left alone."

Zhenya smiled as he glanced at Bazim sitting across from him. Bazim had a look on his face as if he had witnessed something strange. Hearing the unexpected call on speakerphone, he wondered what was going on, and the content of the conversation was shocking. That "psycho" was pretending to be in a relationship, which was surprising enough, but hearing the deep male voice on the other end left him astonished. Though he had suspected, hearing it firsthand was a shock.

Bazim paled and muttered in disbelief.

"That Korean spy...?"

"He's not a spy anymore."

Zhenya's casual response made Bazim groan and hold his head.

Zhenya had returned to the country, and Bazim had dropped everything to come find him. About two weeks ago, an unknown terrorist had attacked civilians in Cuba, and Zhenya had appeared at the scene. Somehow, he had actively helped the terrorist escape.

Because of this, Cuba, an old ally, had filed an unofficial complaint, and the Kremlin was not pleased. Before things affected his family, Bazim had to get Zhenya under control.

"Yevgeny, what the hell are you planning?"

"What did I do?"

"Why is an ambassador like you getting involved in things that benefit neither the country nor yourself?"

"You're mistaken, Bazim. It may not be in the national interest, but it's very much related to my personal interest. If my lover is in danger, I'll do whatever it takes to save him. Ask the Kremlin you revere so much—if Natasha were about to be devoured by Baba Yaga, would he just stand by and watch?"

Bazim couldn't answer and remained silent. Natasha, whom Zhenya had mentioned, was the well-known mistress of the president. Backed by the president, she didn't hesitate to engage in all sorts of eccentric and illegal activities. Though the Kremlin always covered up her misdeeds, earning public disapproval, the president dismissed all criticism with his authority.

For someone like that to criticize Zhenya's actions was ironic. What was allowed for one wasn't for the other? It was absurd watching them undermine themselves.

"You look like a bird with its tail on fire, running around aimlessly. It seems like you've heard something. Go and tell the Kremlin not to worry about such a small uproar and to keep their composure as a great nation. After all, they don't care what others think, right? Protests from Cuba? They'll take it as if the neighbor's dog is barking. If they think they can catch me for this, they're sorely mistaken."

“So, are you just going to keep doing whatever you want? Are you going to turn the Kremlin into your enemy?”

“When have we ever been on the same side?”

Zhenya, who had been mocking him, suddenly stood up. Bazim tensed, going rigid. Even though they were comrades-in-arms, he felt the same intimidation as from any other person. Zhenya wasn’t swayed by hierarchy or recognition, responding only to his whims. His threshold for excitement was so low that he was no different from a wild animal. Zhenya looked down at Bazim and made a request.

“Bazim, mind your own business. If your dream is to be a simple servant to the Kremlin, keep licking Lomonosov’s boots as you have been. I’ve told you many times—so long as you don’t touch what’s mine, there’ll be no need for confrontation. Is that so hard to understand?”

Zhenya tilted his head theatrically as if he couldn’t grasp it. After holding Bazim’s gaze for a moment, he abruptly turned away and began packing his things. He spoke sweetly on the phone, saying he’d soon be with his lover, and it seemed he was leaving immediately. Faced with his carefree attitude, Bazim raised his voice.

“How long are you going to keep acting so arrogant, Yevgeny? Do you know where all the luxuries you’ve enjoyed so far come from?”

“Do you really think it’s thanks to the Kremlin? Or do you mean it’s due to the prestige of your family?”

Zhenya slowly turned toward Bazim. The floating, playful expression disappeared, and the atmosphere grew cold. His blue eyes were as sharp as ever.

“I think I’ve already paid all my debts. Even now, I’m showing more than enough restraint.”

“What?”

“Do you really believe Lomonosov hasn’t eliminated me just because of our family? No. That man has wiped out anything that threatens him. It doesn’t matter if they’re family, a close confidant, or a powerful source of funding. Bogdanov? To him, it’s neither a problem nor a concern. It might be a bit inconvenient, but he’d simply kill everyone and take what’s left. There are plenty who could replace ‘Bogdanov.’ But the reason he hasn’t done it is…”

Zhenya let his words hang in the air as he thumped his chest. Then he pointed at Bazim.
“It’s because this is engraved on my chest and on yours as well. They are afraid of stirring up the hornet's nest without having unraveled the secret of ‘Anastasia.’”

“You underestimate that person too much. He believes that losing pride means losing everything. If you keep challenging him, you’ll be punished as an example. It doesn’t matter who you are; how are you going to face hundreds of thousands of troops?”

“I can’t defeat him with troops. But what about firepower?”

“Yevgeny!”

“They still haven’t managed to complete a single hypersonic missile, right? They are boasting about missiles that only exist in name.”

Suddenly, he mentioned the missiles and laughed. The development of hypersonic missiles was one of Russia's most important national projects. These missiles could travel 480 km in just five minutes, moving so fast that existing missile defense systems struggled to intercept them. The Kremlin had boasted about successfully developing hypersonic missiles using purely domestic technology and that they were already in practical use. However, in reality, related research had been stalled for years.

“It’s not as if just one part can set an example, is it? If you act foolishly, I’ll show you that missile you’re so eager to complete right in front of your eyes. Fireworks in the Kremlin... it would be quite a spectacle, wouldn’t you agree?”

This implied that Zhenya had even managed to acquire a hypersonic missile. Bazim let out a sigh. From what he knew, Zhenya wasn’t someone who boasted. The words coming out of Zhenya’s mouth, no matter how absurd they seemed, always had the potential to become reality.

“Haa... I don’t expect great loyalty from you. I only ask that you at least pretend to care for the family. I’ve given you everything you wanted. Isn’t that enough? I just ask that you keep calm and that your news doesn’t reach the Kremlin. Is that so difficult?”

“For the family, you say. Since you wish it, I’ll give you one last warning for the sake of our great family and brotherhood.”

Zhenya approached Bazim with firm steps. The enormous shadow that swiftly closed in on Bazim enveloped him immediately.

“Don’t return to my island without my permission. Stop sneaking around like a thief and snooping everywhere. It’s useless. If you ignore me, the guardian will welcome you from now on.”

For some reason, that guardian didn’t seem human. Unless it was a surface-to-air missile capable of eliminating any intruder without leaving a trace.

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Chapter End Notes

Support the author by purchasing the novel on Ridibooks.

An omen: For better or worse

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•SPANISH DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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A vast field of snow stretched out around Kwon Taekjoo. Everything was completely white, with not a single footprint visible in the deep, accumulated snow. Even the bare branches of the scattered trees were covered in snow.

“Here we are again.”

Taekjoo muttered to himself while surveying the area, wondering if he was on Ajinoki Island. Suddenly, he chuckled. He had been thinking about Zhenya all day, and it seemed his subconscious had led him here.

He started walking in a random direction. The geography and the overall atmosphere felt quite familiar. If Zhenya's mansion were near a cliff, this could really be Ajinoki.

But as he looked around, there was no mansion, not even a cabin. Nor were there any signs of animals like reindeer or rabbits. Was it all just a dream?

He wandered aimlessly across the vast field. Eventually, he spotted small footprints. They belonged to a child, not an adult. For some reason, he felt relieved. Smiling, he quickened his pace, following the tiny tracks.

Soon, he saw a child crouched in the distance, wrapped in a fur shapka, boots, and a fur coat. Still, he recognized him instantly.

“Zhenya.”

He called out excitedly, but the boy didn't respond. He didn't turn or react at all. Was it because this was a dream, too, and he couldn't communicate properly?

"Hey, why are you out here in the cold? Where's your house?"

He took long strides toward the boy as he asked. But the child remained motionless, head down, staring at something. Upon closer inspection, he noticed the boy's small body trembling slightly. It wasn't a good sign.

"Hey, little one. What's wrong?"

He reached out and turned the child by the shoulder. Only then did he see the young Zhenya's face, soaked in tears. Shocked by the unexpected scene, he froze when he saw what the boy was holding. It was a blood-soaked corpse. The face had been shattered by a bullet, impossible to recognize. He could only guess who it was by the fingers, nails, and build.

The corpse Zhenya was clinging to was Kwon Taekjoo.

"Ugh… Zainka. My Zainka."

With tears streaming down his face, Zhenya began to sob. He was so stunned that he couldn't think of how to comfort him. Meanwhile, the corpse grew redder and redder. Blood was gushing from somewhere, forming a torrent. Both the body and young Zhenya were sinking deeper into the crimson flood.

"Aaaaaang."

The young Zhenya let out a piercing wail. Suddenly, the once calm sky lit up. Then, unknown objects started to fall thickly, like rain. They were countless bombs. Instinctively, he reached out to the young Zhenya.

"Zhenya!"

He screamed his name with all his strength. But it was in vain, as the bombs falling everywhere exploded, shaking the earth and tearing the ground apart. Though he fought desperately, the distance between him and Zhenya only grew larger.

"Aaaaang, Aaaaang!"

The young Zhenya's crying grew sharper and sharper, until it became so loud it seemed like it would tear his eardrums. Just then, the snow on the ground lifted in a white whirlwind, and thousands of bombs buried in the ground shot up into the sky. The bombs collided everywhere, igniting flames. The chain of explosions sent waves of pressure across the land, devastating everything in an instant. Finally, even the child, sobbing uncontrollably, vanished without a trace.

"Hah…!"

He woke up with a jolt. The familiar sight of his room suddenly filled his vision, causing a slight dizziness. Even when he squeezed his eyes shut, the feeling didn't subside easily. He

felt like he couldn’t breathe.

He groaned softly as he ran a hand over his face. His palm was instantly soaked with sweat. His limbs ached from how much he had struggled in the nightmare. After covering his eyes with his arm for a moment to catch his breath, he punched the bed in frustration.

“Damn it... what an absurd dream.”

He sat up abruptly. Cold sweat ran down his back and chest. The sensation was so uncomfortable that he gritted his teeth. His neck, the insides of his elbows, even the backs of his knees were sticky, making him feel utterly disgusting. He needed a cold shower.

He flung the door open and stepped out. From the kitchen, the sounds of dishes clinking could be heard. It seemed his mother was preparing food.

He glanced at the clock and saw it was already 11 in the morning. He had been lost in thought until late in the night, so he had slept in, which was unusual for him.

"Are you up?"

His mother called out loudly from the kitchen, noticing Kwon Taekjoo’s presence. He was only wearing boxers, so he hurried to the bathroom across the hall.

"Yes. I'll wash up first."

"Alright."

After closing the bathroom door, he looked at himself in the mirror. Despite having rested, his face still looked pale. He sighed and slowly walked to the shower.

He stood there for a while, letting the water cascade over him. Gradually, the warmth of his body faded, and his scattered thoughts began to settle.

He didn’t attach much meaning to dreams. He just thought they were deep emotions or subconscious feelings manifesting freely while reason slept. Everything was without context and unfolded absurdly.

However, the dream about the boy who resembled Zhenya always left an odd impression in his mind. Every time he encountered the child, he was left with a mix of complex emotions and a sense of unease. Although the boy resembled a young Zhenya, there was no proof it was really him. Only Kwon Taekjoo saw him that way. Even if it was him, it was nothing more than an illusion that vanished upon waking.

Despite trying to convince himself it was nothing, he couldn’t forget the image of the boy crying bitterly.

"It can't be anything important."

He shook his head. Then, he started scrubbing his wet hair vigorously, as if trying to wash away all the confusing thoughts from his mind.

After a quick shower, he returned to his room. Before putting on his underwear, he checked his phone. There was no message from Zhenya. Even though he had explained everything clearly, nothing had changed. It was like talking to a wall.

"That son of a..."

He stared at the phone in frustration and pressed the call button. But before it could ring, an automated voice informed him that the person he was trying to reach was unavailable. Did Zhenya turn off his phone? Or maybe he didn't even realize it was off.

He threw the phone onto the bed in irritation.

"Damn it! That big idiot just makes me worry. No, I'm the crazy one. Who the hell am I even worried about?"

Running his hands through his hair in frustration, he headed toward the kitchen.

As expected, lunch was already set on the table. He took the ladle from his mother, who was about to serve the soup.

"Let me do it."

He gently guided her to the chair, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. Then, he served the hot soup and brought it to the table. He also moved the rice and side dishes that his mother had prepared, using his large hands to carry everything at once.

"It's just the two of us, and you've made a ton of food. Honestly, Mom, you always go all out."

"You always eat well when I cook for you."

"That's true. Let's dig in."

"Yes. Eat slowly and plenty."

Mother and son sat down together at the table and began eating. During the meal, he cheerfully complimented his mother's cooking, saying it was delicious and that her skills were unmatched. He did this to keep her from worrying about how pale he looked.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, Kwon Taekjoo's mother didn't pay much attention to him. She was absorbed in her own thoughts and barely touched her food. Worried that something might be wrong, he observed her in silence. Suddenly, their eyes met, and his mother smiled timidly.

"I'm going to the temple after lunch."

"The temple? All of a sudden?"

His mother often visited a nearby temple when she felt unsettled or when she thought about his father and brother. She did this to calm her mind through prayer.

“Is something wrong?”

“…No, I just want to make an offering after all this time.”

“What’s going on?”

When he pressed her gently, his mother hesitated a little longer before speaking.

“It’s about your aunt in Canada.”

The aunt in Canada was his mother’s older sister, ten years her senior. She had moved to Canada right after getting married, so Kwon Taekjoo had barely seen her. However, his mother and she were very close and talked almost every day. When his father and brother died in service, she had traveled thousands of miles to stay with his mother for months.

“Yes. How’s Aunt doing? It’s been a while since I last saw her.”

“Do you remember she had surgery for a brain tumor some time ago? They said they removed it completely, but lately, she’s been having vision problems and difficulty moving. She went to the hospital, and they told her it’s come back... She’ll need another surgery, but the location isn’t good, so she’s very worried. Even if the surgery goes well, the prognosis might not be favorable this time.”

“Ah…”

“But there’s not much I can do from here. I can only pray that the surgery goes well and that she recovers without any complications.”

It was natural to feel disturbed upon learning that a loved one, someone who had always been reliable and supportive, was about to face a life-or-death situation in a foreign country. His mother had always worried about the well-being of others, and Kwon Taekjoo had played a big role in that. Always living on the edge of danger, he had deceived his mother with the excuse that he was doing it for her, which was a great disservice to her.

“I’ll take you.”

“Oh, no need. I can go quickly on my own.”

“You get tired driving back and forth. I don’t have anything to do today, so let’s go together.”

“You know you don’t like going to the temple.”

“I also want to get some fresh air.”

His mother looked at Kwon Taekjoo with a surprised expression. He gazed back calmly and said:

“Come with me today.”

His mother, unusually persistent, smiled and replied:

“Alright then…”

“But is it okay for you to miss work so often?”

His mother looked concerned. She seemed uneasy because her son, whom she rarely saw, had been home for several days.

“Why? You used to complain that I was always working. Now you’re already tired of seeing me?”

“No, I just thought maybe you got fired from the embassy.”

“Fired? No. It’s just that the ambassador hasn’t arrived yet.”

“Really? Don’t you have anything to do if he’s not here?”

“Well, more or less. My main job is to assist the ambassador.”

“So, when the ambassador returns to his country, what will you do? Will you have to look for another job?”

“Well, that could happen.”

His casual response deepened his mother’s concern. It wasn’t uncommon for her to ask occasionally how much longer Zhenya would stay in Korea. She already dreaded the fact that his term would eventually end. She was also worried that her son might end up jobless.

“Don’t worry. It’s not like there’s nowhere else for me to work.”

“I’m just afraid you’ll end up in a dangerous place again, like before. Now I see you more stable and happier, Taekjoo. That’s why I wish the ambassador would stay in Korea.”

His mother believed Kwon Taekjoo had left that line of work, but he never really had. Yet, she saw him as more at peace now. The only real difference was that Zhenya was always by his side. Zhenya not only filled the emptiness in Kwon Taekjoo, but also took part in his operations, making his work much easier.

Before, even after successfully completing a mission, he never felt fully at ease. Taekjoo couldn’t truly relax, not even at home. He had to act like everything was fine in front of his mother. If he got hurt, he would hide it and suffer in silence.

The guilt and heavy burden of responsibility had gradually faded. Now, when Taekjoo finishes work, all he thinks about is getting home as quickly as possible. In Zhenya’s arms, he feels a calm he’s never known before, his body and mind fully at ease. Taekjoo has grown accustomed to having him by his side.

“…Me too.”

Taekjoo murmured, lost in deep thought. In truth, he didn’t even realize what he was saying.

Kwon Taekjoo knew he couldn't expect Zhenya to stay in Korea forever, but he still wished for it. Even though he couldn't do much for Zhenya as a partner and constantly put him in danger, Taekjoo remained selfish.

"Son, is something bothering you?"

His mother's question pulled Kwon Taekjoo out of his thoughts. He glanced at the rearview mirror and saw his serious face reflected. He quickly changed his expression.

"Me? No, why?"

"You seem to have a lot on your mind. Your expression looks so grim."

"I think it's because I didn't sleep well. Maybe I played too much?"

He tried to ease his mother's concern with a light excuse. As always, she scolded him.

"What? At your age, you're still staying up all night playing games? What good does that do?"

"Come on, I haven't had a break in a while. I'm just playing for a bit to blow off some steam, so please, let me enjoy it."

"What? How could playing video games relieve stress? They say it actually makes it worse. Constant exposure to violence can make your brain waves unstable."

"It's not that serious. Oh, we're here."

They arrived just in time. Despite it being a weekday and the temple not being a famous one, the parking lot was empty. He parked as close to the entrance as possible since they had to walk uphill to reach it.

The shade from the thick trees made the summer heat more tolerable, and now and then, a pine-scented breeze would pass, refreshing him. Though the place was peaceful and pleasant, he rarely visited, always claiming to be too busy. In truth, he avoided coming because it was hard to see his mother so sad each time. He knew all too well what her life would be like if he followed in his father’s or brother’s footsteps.

"Are you going all the way to the top too?"

"Yes. Since we're here, let's go."

His mother looked at Taekjoo in surprise before saying, "Let's go," as she began to walk ahead. He followed slowly; a few steps behind.

Breathing in the fresh, clean air, he relished the tranquility of the place. Suddenly, the loud roar of an engine shattered the peace. He turned abruptly, thinking some maniac was disturbing the temple's calm. His frown eased when he saw a familiar-colored Bugatti. His mother also exclaimed in surprise.

"Isn't that the ambassador's car?"

"Looks like it."

"How did he know we were here? Did you tell him, Taekjoo?"

"No."

"Really? Well, go quickly."

"Yes. Mom, you go on ahead."

"Alright."

Taekjoo quickly retraced his steps uphill. The Bugatti, which had driven straight into the parking lot, stopped without bothering to park properly. Finally, the driver's door opened, and Zhenya stepped out. Though his appearance hadn't changed at all, there was something almost unreal about him.

Zhenya didn't seem surprised to see Taekjoo approaching. It was as if he knew exactly where Taekjoo was and what he was doing. He shot him a slightly annoyed look as he walked over, but when Zhenya noticed the irritation on Taekjoo's face, he smiled.

"I told you, Taekjoo. 'Soon' means 'soon.'"

"When did you get here?"

"Just now."

Had he come straight from the airport? The phone had been silent the whole drive, so Taekjoo hadn't expected Zhenya to already be back in Korea. If he was going to show up, he could've at least given him a heads-up. Zhenya always caught him off guard. When would he ever start acting like a normal person?

"How did you know I was here?"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters, you bastard! Did you put a tracker on my phone? Install some spy app?"

"Taekjoo, this is your fault. You always get yourself into dangerous situations, and no one ever knows where you'll be."

Zhenya continued to blame others for his reckless, over-the-top behavior. Didn't he understand the word "self-reflection"? And yet, Taekjoo still chose to be in a relationship with him.

Taekjoo eyed Zhenya with irritation, scanning his bright face and body. He didn't seem to have suffered any injuries.

“Did you finish your business?”

“It's rare for you to ask about my work, Taekjoo.”

“Well, it's because of me that you had to negotiate with that Mathiason guy or whatever his name is.”

“True. It came at quite the cost. Do you know how much the maintenance fees are?”

Zhenya nodded and muttered mockingly. He kept grinning as if something amused him greatly. Taekjoo studied his eyes carefully, one by one, and asked cautiously:

“...You only went to handle that?”

“What else?”

“I don't know, maybe you got called back home again.”

For a moment, Zhenya looked surprised, but then he smiled again. His chest puffed up slightly. Clearly, he had misunderstood Taekjoo's words with enthusiasm.

"Taekjoo, are you still worried that I'll get engaged to someone else? Do you want to have me all to yourself?"

His tone was so light, it sounded as if he were singing.

“That's not it...!”

Taekjoo clenched his fists in frustration but then relaxed them. It wasn’t worth the argument. He scratched the back of his head irritably.

“Ah! You really give me a headache.”

“Does your head hurt because you’re thinking about me too much? That’s actually kind of cute.”

Zhenya’s arrogant smile made him even more infuriating. He didn’t seem to have suffered any emotional damage at all. Taekjoo figured he could check later if there were any hidden injuries. It wasn’t clear who worried more about whom. Clicking his tongue, he shook his head.

At that moment, Zhenya began looking around as if searching for someone.

"Does your head hurt from thinking about me so much? That’s pretty adorable."

Zhenya smiled arrogantly, which made him even more irritating. He didn't seem to have suffered any psychological damage. Kwon Taekjoo thought he might check later for any hidden wounds. It wasn’t clear who was more worried about whom. He clicked his tongue and shook his head.

At that moment, Zhenya glanced around as if looking for someone.

"By the way, what happened to the little woman?"

"I told her to go ahead. But how did you know I was here with my mother?"

"I've been here a few times before."

"Here? Why?"

"It's a place the little woman visits often."

Zhenya replied indifferently. Kwon Taekjoo's mother had indeed brought him to the temple several times, even though they were almost like friends. He thought that his mother would feel very lonely when Zhenya returned to his country. While lost in these thoughts, Zhenya took a step closer, almost pressing against him.

"What's wrong? Why are you getting so close?"

"After being so anxious, aren't you going to give me a reunion kiss?"

Zhenya pretended to be hurt, with a shameless expression. He slowly tilted his face toward Taekjoo, making his scent even stronger. Was it because he hadn't seen him in a while? Or had he really missed him so much in those few days? Taekjoo's fingers trembled, and his throat tightened slightly.

"Idiot. Not in front of a sacred temple. It's bad luck."

He grabbed Zhenya's face, stopping him from getting any closer. Zhenya didn't pull away. Instead, he pressed his lips against Taekjoo's palm while responding.

"I didn't know you believed in gods, Taekjoo."

"That's exactly why. Even a small offense could provoke their wrath. Plus, my mother could see us from anywhere, and she knows you're here."

"Let's go," Taekjoo said, nodding toward the entrance above. He tried to remove his hand from Zhenya's face, but Zhenya suddenly grabbed his wrist. Before Taekjoo could react, Zhenya licked his palm. As the line of his hand dampened, Taekjoo's shoulders tensed involuntarily.

"Ah, what are you doing?"

"I'm hungry. I need a taste before causing any trouble. Since I can't bite your lips, I'll have to settle for this."

Zhenya bit down firmly on the lower part of Taekjoo's palm before releasing his arm. Seeing the clearly visible teeth marks, Taekjoo felt a wave of revulsion.

"Do you really think you're a dog?"

"You should be proud I held back with just one bite."

"Proud of what? Just make sure you don't mess up in front of my mother."

"You worry too much. It's not the first time I've seen the little woman. Besides, she likes me."

"Well, I don't know if my mother would like you as much if she knew you're glued to her son day and night."

Arguing, they made their way to the temple. His mother had already entered the sanctuary and was out of sight. He had no intention of praying with her, so he quietly watched the serene man beside him.

"Why does the little woman keep coming here?"

Zhenya, who had been following silently, asked with a bored expression. Although he sometimes accompanied his mother, didn't he know the purpose of these visits? Taekjoo shrugged and gave an answer Zhenya could understand.

"It's like a church or a cathedral. Sometimes people honor the souls of those who've passed, and other times they pray to God for peace of mind."

"I don't get it."

"Why not? If you had believed in God from the beginning, you wouldn't have lived the way you did. How are you going to clear that 'karma'?"

"Karma?"

"When you die and meet God or whatever, ask them to make you a 'death angel.' You can't reincarnate as a human anymore, and that suits you perfectly."

"Taekjoo, are you going to keep saying things I don't understand?"

"I told you to learn Korean, idiot."

Zhenya squinted with suspicion. Surely, it would take a long time for a foreigner to master words like 'karma' or 'reincarnation.'

"And you?"

"What about me?"

"Do you believe in God?"

"No, I don't believe either… But some people can only keep living if they do."

Kwon Taekjoo's smile slowly faded. Meanwhile, his gaze settled on the sanctuary where his mother was praying.

"They believe that if they sincerely remember and honor those who've passed, the soul of the departed will find peace wherever it is. That belief seems to comfort the living too. But me, when I die, I'd want the people who knew me to forget I ever existed as quickly as possible."

Maybe it was because he lived closer to death than life. Even though he was breathing, he projected his feelings onto the dead more than the living. He often told Zhenya, as if it were a habit, 'What will you do without me?' Kwon Taekjoo always had his own absence in mind.

"……."

Zhenya's gaze pierced into Kwon Taekjoo. Just then, the wind made the branches of the trees sway in unison. Kwon Taekjoo's hair also began to drift softly.

In the next instant, Zhenya suddenly reached out and grabbed Kwon Taekjoo, who was looking away. With a puzzled expression, Taekjoo asked why. Since it wasn't a deliberate action, Zhenya just shook his head.

Taekjoo smiled and scolded him.

"Arrogant bastard."

Then, he removed Zhenya's hand from his arm and gently took it in his own. Pretending to be indifferent, he turned his gaze away. Zhenya tightened his grip on Kwon Taekjoo's hand, as if afraid he would disappear if he didn't hold on tight.

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Chapter End Notes

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I'm really glad you're enjoying this translation! Reading everyone's comments motivates me to keep going. I just want to remind you all that I do this in my free time. I wish I could update more often, but real life doesn't always allow it. Also, translating from Korean to English takes time because I want to provide you with a translation that's easy to understand and of good quality.

I don't have a schedule for updates, so I truly appreciate everyone's patience.

One or the Other

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•SPANISH DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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"Oh dear, if I had known the ambassador was coming today, I would have prepared a meal at home," Kwon Taekjoo's mother said, visibly regretful.

"You should've told me he was coming," she added, scolding Kwon Taekjoo. He wondered how much longer his mother would continue treating Zhenya like royalty.

"Come on, it's nice to eat out once in a while. The food here looks good," he replied.

"Is it the same as a homemade meal made with love and effort? Besides, the ambassador is very particular about food."

"Nowadays, he eats just about anything."

Kwon Taekjoo kept reassuring his mother while discreetly kicking Zhenya under the table. Forcing a smile, he asked, "Isn't that right, Mr. Ambassador?" Despite his subtle cries for help, Zhenya only gave him a confused look.

"Smile, you bastard."

"What? Out of nowhere?"

"And nod while you're at it," Kwon Taekjoo muttered. Zhenya raised his eyebrows, clearly disoriented, but then focused on Kwon Taekjoo's mother. He smiled and nodded slowly, just as Kwon Taekjoo had instructed. That simple smile was enough to ease her concerns.

"Thank goodness. Now, eat up, Mr. Ambassador."

Zhenya nodded again. Even though he still didn't understand Korean, he seemed to grasp the general meaning of her words. He had always been quick to pick things up, and after spending so much time with Kwon Taekjoo's mother, it didn't surprise him anymore.

Out of habit, Kwon Taekjoo began arranging the side dishes he knew Zhenya could eat, placing them in front of him.

"Hurry up and start eating," he urged. Zhenya lifted his spoon and tasted the ginseng chicken soup, then carefully picked up a piece of chicken with his fork and took a small bite. Kwon Taekjoo watched him eat until he couldn't stand it any longer and started handling Zhenya's stone pot with his chopsticks.

"Ugh, what the hell? You're just picking at your food."

With practiced ease, Kwon Taekjoo separated the chicken thighs and placed them in a separate bowl, shredding the meat into medium-sized pieces. Only then did Zhenya spear the white meat with his fork and pop it into his mouth. He closed his eyes gracefully, savoring the flavor. He didn't seem the least bit uncomfortable being served by someone else.

Annoyed by the sight, Kwon Taekjoo muttered, "Spoiled prince." As usual, Zhenya took it as a compliment, lifting his head with a satisfied smile. Kwon Taekjoo clicked his tongue and was about to dive into his own meal when he caught his mother's gaze. For some reason, she gave him a knowing smile.

"Why aren't you eating, mother?"

"You know, it would have been so nice if you'd done that for him from the start."

"Done what?"

"He may be younger, but he's still your boss. You should treat him well, like you just did. Who else can the ambassador rely on in this foreign country? I was worried you'd act recklessly with him, but it's so nice to see you two getting along so well."

"Getting along? He's supposed to be my superior, but he can't even take care of himself. I had no choice but to help him."

"Oh, Taekjoo. Why are you being so shy about it?"

"I'm not. Now hurry up and eat; the food's getting cold."

"Alright, let's eat."

His mother neatly separated a chicken thigh from her own stone pot, placed it on a plate, and handed it to Zhenya.

"Mr. Ambassador, we're nearing the end of summer. In Korea, we replenish our strength by eating healthy foods like this. I know you're prone to heatstroke, so have some of this to regain your energy."

Zhenya obediently accepted the plate with a smile, and Kwon Taekjoo's mother responded with one of her own. No matter how many times Kwon Taekjoo witnessed this kind of exchange, it always caught him off guard.

"Taekjoo, would you like some too...?"

"No, I'm good. I have enough."

His mother tried to offer him the last chicken thigh, but Kwon Taekjoo firmly refused. She complained that she couldn't eat much due to her age and insisted on putting the thigh in his bowl anyway. In response, Kwon Taekjoo pulled a thigh from his own chicken and placed it on her plate.

Zhenya watched them argue with amusement and remarked with a chuckle, "Koreans are funny."

Kwon Taekjoo's mother turned to Zhenya and asked if he was enjoying the meal. Zhenya's eyes curved into a smile. For a man like him, the way he played along was almost too charming.

"The ambassador's birthday is coming up, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Did you tell him I want to make him a birthday meal?"

"Mother, any meal would be more than enough. Why go through the trouble of a special birthday meal?"

"Well, you only have a birthday once a year. We could invite a few people to come celebrate with him. We could invite Jongwoo, and maybe Olga if she's free. Honestly, I wouldn't mind inviting all your embassy colleagues. I'd love to meet them and ask them to take good care of my son."

"That would be so weird, he's not even your own son. Besides, if I invited everyone, they'd start rumors about me using my mother to suck up to my boss."

"Really? You think so?"

"Yeah. So let's keep it simple. It's already a lot of work for you, mother. The ambassador should be grateful just to get some seaweed soup."

Zhenya's gaze shifted between Kwon Taekjoo and his mother, apparently wondering what they were arguing about as they both threw him subtle glances. Kwon Taekjoo looked at him and said, "Isn't that right?" dragging him back into the conversation as reinforcement.

"I have no idea what you just said."

"I told you before, just go along with me when we're with my mother."

"Maybe I would if your translations weren't a complete disaster."

"And how would you know if they're a disaster or not?"

"Unfortunately for you, I'm not as dumb as you think."

"Ever heard of a white lie, you bastard?"

"A white lie? That's rich, coming from you."

"Look who's talking."

"Look at yourself."

Zhenya flatly refused to let Kwon Taekjoo have the last word. Kwon Taekjoo turned his gaze back to his mother.

"Anyway, I think my mom's going to be heartbroken when you go back to Russia."

"Taekjoo, as long as you're here, that won't happen."

"How do you know? Did your country say they'd let you stay here forever?"

"It's safer for them if I stay here, and besides, it's what I want."

"You told me you weren't staying here because you liked Korea."

"I never said you were in that category."

"Really?"

"If I'm still here, despite not being thrilled, doesn't that say enough?" Zhenya muttered to himself, his eyes drifting toward Kwon Taekjoo's mother, who was seated across from him.

As if she had been waiting, Kwon Taekjoo's mother started bombarding Zhenya with questions—whether anything had happened in Russia during his absence, if Olga was doing well, how his parents were, if he planned to stay in the country for a while, and if he'd be resuming his embassy duties soon. Although Zhenya couldn't understand a single word, he listened attentively, giving her a kind smile.

Kwon Taekjoo felt a curious sense of pride in Zhenya at moments like this. It was as if Zhenya was genuinely trying to bring Kwon Taekjoo and the people around him into his small, restricted world.

Kwon Taekjoo gave Zhenya a firm squeeze on his thigh under the table. Zhenya's gaze shifted from his lap to the side of Kwon Taekjoo's face. Kwon Taekjoo pretended to listen to his mother's words while whispering just loud enough for only Zhenya to hear.

"Let's go grab a drink after this. I have something to tell you."

Zhenya's lips curled into a soft smile.

"Sure, I was planning on doing the same anyway."

After dinner, Kwon Taekjoo drove his mother home and planned to leave his car there overnight. Zhenya followed him obediently, but he drove so closely behind Kwon Taekjoo's car, from the restaurant to the parking garage beneath his apartment, that Kwon Taekjoo was stressed the whole way. He parked quickly, helped his mother out of the car, and shot a furious glare at Zhenya's Bugatti.

Zhenya, completely unfazed, got out of the car and nodded toward the elevator, where Kwon Taekjoo's mother was heading. She paused to say goodbye to Zhenya.

"Have a safe trip home, Mr. Ambassador. Feel free to visit us anytime you're free."

Zhenya didn't respond, but he flashed a smile that even made the corners of his eyes crinkle. Kwon Taekjoo's mother was momentarily breathless at the sight. Kwon Taekjoo thought the whole exchange reminded him of a seasoned celebrity effortlessly charming an innocent, starstruck fan.

He knew she'd keep staring at Zhenya in awe if he let her, so he gently turned her by the shoulder and guided her to the elevator, even pressing the button for her.

"You can go up now. I'm going for drinks with him."

"Alright."

"Mm… I might not come home tonight; we could end up drinking until late."

"I see, don't worry about me, go enjoy yourself. Just don't drink so much that you get sick tomorrow."

For some strange reason, his mother was exceptionally lenient when it came to him spending time with Zhenya. She didn't mind if he spent the night 'drinking' with Zhenya or went on 'business trips' with him for several days. Even when she couldn't contact him while he was away, she wasn't as worried as before. In fact, if he called her during work, she'd scold him to hang up right away, saying the ambassador might be waiting. Did she really trust Zhenya that much? Zhenya wasn't someone worthy of such blind trust.

"Go on now. The ambassador's waiting for you."

It was clear tonight was no exception. Once the elevator arrived, his mother stepped inside and waved him off. Kwon Taekjoo nodded but waited for the doors to fully close before turning around.

Zhenya was waiting, casually leaning against the passenger door of his Bugatti. When Kwon Taekjoo approached, Zhenya nodded toward the driver's seat.

"You drive."

Zhenya slid into the passenger seat, leaving Kwon Taekjoo to do as he was told. He'd been driving fine until now, but it seemed the spoiled brat was back to his usual self. Kwon Taekjoo clicked his tongue and reluctantly got behind the wheel.

As he buckled his seatbelt and released the brake, a pale hand suddenly reached toward his face. Startled, Kwon Taekjoo flinched, his body tensing up. Zhenya smiled, satisfied with his reaction, and his fingers brushed against the cold curve of Kwon Taekjoo's ear, warming it. Goosebumps rose on Kwon Taekjoo's skin, and the tiny hairs on his cheek stood on end. He scrunched up, his shoulder instinctively lifting from the ticklish sensation. But Zhenya persisted, leaning across the console to trail his tongue along Kwon Taekjoo's cheek and ear, even nibbling on the outer edge of his ear with his dry lips.

Kwon Taekjoo was utterly stunned.

"Is this why you told me to drive?"

"What's wrong? Would you prefer I drive?" Zhenya asked, pressing kisses along Kwon Taekjoo's cheek and neck.

Kwon Taekjoo was all too aware that if Zhenya were driving, they'd probably crash into something before they even left the parking garage. He sighed as Zhenya nestled against his neck, inhaling his scent with enthusiasm.

"Idiot, just give me ten minutes to get to your apartment."

"You should be proud I've been this patient already."

"Ugh… Could you stop, please? I can't see a damn thing because your huge body's blocking my view."

"What's with all the complaints? You used to drive just fine with your eyes covered," Zhenya teased, his tone amused by the memory.

Kwon Taekjoo's mind flashed back to the time he was sent to Syria on an international mission. North Korea, having long been an ally of Syria in nuclear collaboration, had the NIS on high alert for any diplomatic maneuvering from either country. Eventually, they discovered that a North Korean trading company, Cheongang, had supplied a significant amount of aluminum tubes to Syria. These tubes were a key component of centrifuges used to enrich uranium, raising suspicions that North Korea was aiding Syria in developing nuclear weapons. It was crucial to confirm whether this was true, and naturally, this mission had been assigned to Kwon Taekjoo.

As usual, Zhenya had shown up for the mission too, apparently visiting the nuclear facilities as an accredited guest. In any case, Kwon Taekjoo managed to successfully complete his mission, whether thanks to Zhenya's interference, his help, or a mix of both. However, just as he was about to finish and escape, the facility's guards caught him, sparking a massive brawl before he managed to flee in the last available Jeep.

The only problem was that during the skirmish, the ammunition exploded, temporarily blinding Kwon Taekjoo. With gunfire raining down on them, he had no choice but to get behind the wheel and rely entirely on Zhenya to guide him. Zhenya directed him through the chaos, calling out obstacles and giving instructions. When they finally escaped, all four tires were shredded, the front and rear bumpers were barely hanging on, and the side mirrors had long since been ripped off. It wasn't exactly a laughable memory, but Kwon Taekjoo couldn't help but chuckle a little, thinking back to the absurd situation.

"I was risking my life back then because it was my job. I don't need to do that now."

"Why not? You loved the adrenaline back then, and you still do. Don't you get even more aroused when it's more dangerous?" Zhenya laughed.

Are you talking about yourself? Kwon Taekjoo thought.

As much as he wanted to, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't find a comeback because Zhenya wasn't entirely wrong. But a sense of bitterness welled up inside him, realizing that most of his memories with Zhenya were tied to moments of danger and risk.

Kwon Taekjoo reached out to play with Zhenya's light-colored hair. The unexpected gesture of tenderness silenced Zhenya's teasing.

"By the way..." Kwon Taekjoo said. Zhenya leaned back, his gaze fixed on him.

"Your birthday is coming up. Is there anything you want?"

"Want something? As if I'm the kind of person who thinks like that."

Zhenya shrugged, not even taking a moment to consider the question. He had lived a life of abundance from the moment he was born, so it was impossible for him to have any materialistic desires. He had everything at his fingertips before he even had the chance to want it. On the other hand, Kwon Taekjoo knew he couldn't afford to buy a gift that matched Zhenya's lavish lifestyle.

Still, he wanted to give Zhenya something he might like, and in doing so, offer him a birthday worth remembering—especially since last year, they hadn't been able to celebrate properly due to work. Plus, Zhenya had probably never heard a heartfelt "Happy Birthday" from anyone in his life.

"Think about it carefully, idiot. Don't let it pass and then complain later that I didn't do anything for you."

"Huh? So, are you going to give me whatever I wish for?"

"Depends on what it is."

"It's not like you have many options anyway. Why are you so picky?"

"How am I supposed to know what ridiculous request you'll come up with, you bastard?"

Kwon Taekjoo shot Zhenya a warning look as Zhenya pouted, acting as if he had been wronged. He sulked and shrugged again.

"I'll take my time to think about it. I don't have birthdays very often, so I'll choose something only you can give me, Taekjoo."

He began nibbling on Kwon Taekjoo's cheek again, murmuring, *"What could it be?"* Kwon Taekjoo gave up trying to push him away—Zhenya was the type to ignore that anyway. Besides, they were almost at Zhenya's place.

They somehow made it to Zhenya's house despite the excessive displays of affection. A sigh of relief escaped Kwon Taekjoo when he finally managed to park. It was a miracle they hadn't crashed, and even more so that they hadn't hit any red lights along the way. If they had, they would have put on quite a show for anyone watching—two men clinging to each other in full view. Just the thought of it made him lose his mind.

"We're here."

Kwon Taekjoo watched Zhenya's calm demeanor with frustration before suddenly grabbing him by the nape of his neck and pulling him in for a hard kiss. His other hand gripped Zhenya's throat as he pressed their lips together, biting and rubbing them mercilessly, as if punishing him for all his previous provocations. It was also a way to vent his frustration over Zhenya's indifference during his absence in Korea.

As their lips clashed, the delicate skin tore, causing a bleeding wound. Kwon Taekjoo slid his tongue along Zhenya's lips before tilting his head and pushing it into his mouth. Zhenya remained still for a moment, surprised by the sudden intensity, but soon a smile tugged at the corner of his lips. His eyes closed, and his eyelashes fluttered as he opened his mouth eagerly, breathing out with a sweet, expectant sigh.

The heat between them soared as their tongues played. They gripped each other's hair and clothes, their tongues entwined with a primal ferocity, like two wild beasts tasting blood. Their rough movements caused their elbows and knees to bump against the steering wheel, but neither paid any attention. They were consumed by their desire for each other, pushing and pulling with equal fervor. Their breaths were ragged, and their hearts pounded violently. The sharp bursts of air escaping between their lips tickled Kwon Taekjoo's throat and face, fueling his lust even more.

Kwon Taekjoo panted, struggling to catch his breath, but the stifling heat persisted. He could only quench his thirst by slipping his tongue across Zhenya's soft lips, his slick tongue, and the wet inner walls of his mouth. It wasn't until he greedily sucked all the accumulated saliva between them that he finally began to pull back.

They stared at each other with burning eyes, their faces just inches apart. The look in their eyes was almost predatory, as if they were seconds away from tearing each other's throats out. Their heavy breathing sent chills through their bodies, while their lips hovered tantalizingly close. Zhenya's pupils contracted sharply in growing anticipation.

In a sudden surge of need, Zhenya shattered the tension between them and yanked Kwon Taekjoo toward him violently. The back of Kwon Taekjoo's head slammed into the car's ceiling, but Zhenya continued to grope him roughly, pressing their bodies together in the cramped space between the dashboard and the seats. As Zhenya buried his face in Kwon Taekjoo's hair, Taekjoo struggled to push him away.

"Uugh... Bastard, not here."

"Mm, but you're hard as a rock."

Zhenya's hand dug into his crotch, grabbing the large bulge in front of his pants. Kwon Taekjoo arched his back at the feeling, but was able to push Zhenya's hand away.

"I may be wanting it badly, but I don't want to end up bent in half."

"Huh? Maybe I should buy another car."

"You'd buy another car just to have sex?"

Kwon Taekjoo gave Zhenya a light tap on the chest as he stepped out of the car, motioning for him to follow. He looked disheveled, his clothes wrinkled, and his hair sticking out in every direction. He straightened his clothes and hair before heading to the front door of Zhenya's apartment. Just as he reached for the doorknob with ease, Zhenya suddenly pressed against his back, trapping him in his arms and burying his face in Kwon Taekjoo's neck.

"You're not a wild animal. Can you wait a minute?"

"I've only been this patient because I'm not a wild animal," Zhenya countered, inhaling deeply to savor Kwon Taekjoo's scent. A soft sigh escaped him before he began nibbling on the back of Kwon Taekjoo's neck.

At that very moment, the security lock beeped and unlocked the door, having recognized Kwon Taekjoo's biometric features.

"Ugh! Wait..."

But before Kwon Taekjoo could react, Zhenya pushed him through the door and into the house. They both tumbled to the floor in a tangled mess, with Kwon Taekjoo landing heavily and banging his knees. The impact sent a sharp pain through him.

"Ow! That hurt, you bastard! You're going to break all my bones."

"You wanted it so bad just a while ago, and now you're acting like nothing happened? Isn't this what you wanted?"

Still pinning Kwon Taekjoo down with the full weight of his body, Zhenya began rubbing his face against the back of Kwon Taekjoo's neck. His nose buried into Kwon Taekjoo's thick hair, and he exhaled a warm, sweet breath.

"Just wait a second! Just wait!"

“Mnh... Taekjoo…”

“Ugh… is someone chasing you? Why are you in such a hurry?!”

Kwon Taekjoo managed to push Zhenya off his back with his elbow, but Zhenya took that opportunity to grab Kwon Taekjoo's chin and kiss him urgently. He pressed his hard erection against Kwon Taekjoo's ass, moaning softly. Kwon Taekjoo's chest slammed against the floor, leaving him unable to breathe. His neck was stiff and sore from the awkward position.

In his desperation to escape, Kwon Taekjoo tried to turn his head, but to no avail. Zhenya, undeterred, brought his lips close to Kwon Taekjoo's ear and slid his tongue into the orifice. The inside of his ear became moist, the wet sound of Zhenya's tongue echoed in his ear sharply.

Kwon Taekjoo ducked his head in disgust, but Zhenya merely bit the back of his neck again as his hand slid down to Kwon Taekjoo's abdomen, unbuttoning the zipper and buckle of his pants. Kwon Taekjoo reached down quickly to stop him, but Zhenya had already wrapped his hand around Taekjoo's cock and began to stroke it gently.

"Weren't you the one asking me when I'd come back? Taekjoo, you were practically begging me earlier, and now you're pretending you don't want it."

"Mn... I never said I don't want it. Just... go slower, you idiot. Ah, ngh... we have the whole night."

"We do? Who knows if I'll be able to enjoy it to the fullest? If you get a work call right when we're having fun, I'm the one who'll lose out," Zhenya replied, biting Kwon Taekjoo's neck, which had gone numb from the repeated attacks.

Zhenya seemed to be carrying a lot of pent-up frustration, likely from all the times their vacations had been interrupted by Kwon Taekjoo’s sudden work obligations. He treated their time together like a rare treat that could be taken away at any moment, devouring it hungrily, like a man starved for too long. Just thinking about it made Kwon Taekjoo’s heart ache.

At that moment, Zhenya felt Kwon Taekjoo's resistance fade and pulled back from his neck. He lifted Kwon Taekjoo’s shirt from the hem, pushing it up over his head, exposing the broad expanse of his back. Zhenya swallowed hard, a lump forming in his throat.

Every time Kwon Taekjoo let out a huff of frustration, Zhenya sank his teeth into his trembling shoulder blade, causing Kwon Taekjoo’s waist to shudder uncontrollably.

"Ah... Ngh..."

"Taekjoo, Taekjoo..."

Zhenya repeated Kwon Taekjoo's name several times, his voice low and almost like a moan as he traced the curve of Kwon Taekjoo’s back with the sharp edge of his nose. Along the way, he pressed lingering kisses that sent tingles down Kwon Taekjoo’s spine. Zhenya savored the warmth of Kwon Taekjoo’s skin and the scent that clung to him until he reached a

scar just above the curve of Kwon Taekjoo’s lower back. Where there had once been a tattoo, there was now a thin layer of new skin. Gently, Zhenya slid the tip of his tongue over the faded marks, as if trying to bring the tattoo back to life. The sensation, both ticklish and strangely pleasant, made Kwon Taekjoo's body writhe in response. A trickle of semen gushed from his cock.

Zhenya's large hand slid over Kwon Taekjoo's cock, rubbing it from base to tip in long, leisurely strokes. With his other hand he caressed Taekjoo's abdomen before pulling down his pants and underpants with a single tug. The elastic band on Kwon Taekjoo's underwear stretched, tightening around his thighs and leaving his ass bouncing on top.

“Aaah...”

Letting out a deep sigh, Zhenya pulled Kwon Taekjoo's arms behind his back, imprisoning them effortlessly with one hand. With the other hand, which had been stroking Kwon Taekjoo's cock, he held Kwon Taekjoo's abdomen, lifting him onto his knees and forcing him to lift his ass high. Kwon Taekjoo ended up unsteadily resting all his weight on his shoulder and left cheek.

“...Aagh, what are you doing, you lunatic bastard?”

“Are you seriously asking because you don't know?”

Zhenya's eyes flashed with a provocative gleam as he looked at Kwon Taekjoo, whose cheeks and ears had reddened, and not just because of the blood rushing to his face. Zhenya pulled Kwon Taekjoo's plump ass apart, revealing the tight little opening in between. He stared at it as he gave Kwon Taekjoo's cock another firm squeeze. Kwon Taekjoo's hole contracted in response to the stimulation.

“So much fuss when you're this eager” Zhenya whispered quietly, completely fascinated, before burying without warning his face in Kwon Taekjoo's asshole.

Zhenya's thick tongue pressed against the thin folds of Kwon Taekjoo's entrance. Taekjoo's whole body jerked as his most private area was thoroughly drenched. His hands, still imprisoned by Zhenya, clenched into tight fists as his erection remained in full effervescence, reacting eagerly to the overwhelming feeling.

Zhenya's lips curved upward as he meticulously traced every inch and crevice, stimulating with the tip of his tongue the opening while it twitched under the tingling sensation.

“Nngh... Wait... Zhenya... Mn...”

With every attack of Zhenya's tongue, Kwon Taekjoo's head tilted down and his body trembled heavily. The sound of his gritted teeth echoed inside his clenched jaw. Zhenya memorized his every move as he continued to suck on his delicate flesh. That's when, without warning, he inserted the tip of his tongue inside Kwon Taekjoo's moistened hole.

“Aah, mmnnn, uughh.”

Kwon Taekjoo's limbs stiffened and his body shuddered. Unable to hold back his moans, he slumped forward, his forehead resting against the bare floor. His fists shook, and his knuckles turned white from the tension, as he was determined to push Zhenya away .

However, Zhenya paid no attention to his futile efforts and plunged his face even deeper, opening his mouth wide as he devoured the soft skin surrounding Kwon Taekjoo's hole, and the curvature of his ass. At the same time, his hand gripped Kwon Taekjoo's cock, pumping it with an energy that was almost painful, as if he wanted to milk him.

“Aahhh... Aahh... Mmmn...”

Kwon Taekjoo's body writhed uncontrollably from the overwhelming sensations. Zhenya's hand gave another tight squeeze before gently wrapping around the tip of Kwon Taekjoo's cock, all while his tongue continued to penetrate deep inside his softening hole. Kwon Taekjoo's asshole grew tighter and tighter in response, closing firmly around his tongue. Gradually, his hand went from pushing Zhenya away to clinging desperately to his light-colored hair.

“Ahgh... I don't... Mmgh like it-... Mngh, aahn...!”

Eventually, with a wet sound, Zhenya removed his lips and instantly pulled his deft hand away from Kwon Taekjoo's cock. Taekjoo's body trembled involuntarily in consequence. His dilated and distended hole, now brimming with saliva, twitched as it opened and closed.

“Aah... What do you think, Taekjoo, do you still think we have plenty of time, do you want me to fuck you nice and slow?”

“Aah... ughh., you fucking... asshole.”

Kwon Taekjoo was breathing heavily as his body trembled in frustration. But Zhenya tightened his grip on his arms, holding him firmly in place. Kwon Taekjoo tried desperately to relieve the overwhelming sensation on his cock, that was about to explode, by rubbing his glans against the floor, but Zhenya prevented his efforts by lifting his abdomen with his other free hand.

“Don't waste your time trying to do it alone. Just ask for it and I'll gladly help you out.”

“Uugh... let go. Nngh, I told you to let go of my arm.”

“How long are you going to keep saying things you don't really mean? Hm?” Zhenya muttered, unzipping his pants. His erection soon fell heavily on Kwon Taekjoo's ass, making the latter's whole body shudder and tense up on the spot.

Zhenya nestled his cock along the curve of Kwon Taekjoo's ass so the thick length pressed deliciously against the pliant flesh. Prominent veins bulged along Zhenya's erection due to his overwhelming arousal as he rubbed it up and down against Kwon Taekjoo. A sensitive, aching throb ran through Taekjoo as the ridges on Zhenya's cock grinded against his hole.

“Mmnn... Aaah...”

“Aaah, you don't need to be shy, Taekjoo. You want me, don't you?”

“Nngh... Mmn... Aah...”

“Just hurry up and ask me to fuck you. Ask me to shove my cock in and make a mess out of you, do it.”, Zhenya insisted, pressing his crotch against Kwon Taekjoo's ass.

Zhenya's glans pressed against Kwon Taekjoo's hole insistently, its weight crushing the sensitive flesh. However, Zhenya didn't stop there. He leaned down to nibble Taekjoo's shoulder as his ear rubbed against Kwon Taekjoo's, folding it under his pressure. Irregular breaths echoed near Kwon Taekjoo's ear, fanning the flame of his own arousal.

“Nngh.... Ahh. Zhenya yes nm..., Hurry...”

“That's it, my zainka.”

“Nngh.... Nnmm, mmm, stop wasting time uuugh and fuckin' put it in me at once...damn it.”

A laugh of disbelief burst from Zhenya. He stopped rubbing himself against Kwon Taekjoo and, without warning, rammed into him until he bottomed out. Taekjoo's whole body stiffened at the intensity of the thrusting as he swallowed a moan that threatened to escape.

“Ahh! Aaah... shit...”.

“What's the matter, don't you like it? I gave it to you just the way you wanted it.”

“Uughh, yes nngh, nnm...”

“Mmh. Are you whining because I'm not fucking you the way you want? You're desperate, aren't you?” Zhenya asked in a teasing tone, his voice heavy with amusement.

He wrapped an arm around Kwon Taekjoo’s neck, squeezing tightly enough to make Kwon Taekjoo’s already unsteady breathing even more labored. Taekjoo’s hands, now free from Zhenya’s grip, rose to grasp his arm, but the hold around his neck didn’t loosen. He was completely at Zhenya’s mercy.

"...Alright, Taekjoo. Mommy [1] will take care of you."

Zhenya desperately nibbled on Kwon Taekjoo's ear before he began pounding him with overwhelming intensity. Each powerful thrust stretched Kwon Taekjoo's inner walls to the limit, only for Zhenya to withdraw in one swift motion, dragging his cock along Kwon Taekjoo's sensitive insides. The overwhelming but arousing sensations made it almost impossible for Kwon Taekjoo to stay upright, even so, Zhenya's firm grip on his abdomen refused to lessen, holding him pinned in place.

Kwon Taekjoo had no choice but to helplessly take every inch of Zhenya's cock, which was thrusting hard into him again and again. Zhenya's rock-hard thighs vigorously slapped against Kwon Taekjoo's behind. The wet sound of their sweat-covered skins flooded the room as they crashed repeatedly. Kwon Taekjoo's skin reddened, swelling from the relentless friction.

“Aaah, ahh! Nnnnm… Aah! Mmm, ahh.... No no- no-...!”

“What was that, still not enough for you?” Zhenya whispered, while licking Kwon Taekjoo's hot cheek slowly and vigorously.

Kwon Taekjoo gritted his teeth, turning his head away, but Zhenya seized the opportunity and plunged his tongue inside Kwon Taekjoo's ear. The invasion caused Taekjoo's shoulders to tense. His moans turned into halting sobs as Zhenya moved his hand from Kwon Taekjoo's abs to encircle his neglected erection.

Zhenya watched each subtle change in Kwon Taekjoo with rapt attention as his hips swayed wildly with each thrust. With a deft flick of his wrist, he began to slide his hand up and down Kwon Taekjoo's cock, intensifying the overwhelming pleasure that quickly drove Kwon Taekjoo to the edge of his sanity.

“Aah, aah, uuugh, nngh, aaah...”

“Aahh, that's it, you're finally making adorable sounds.”

Zhenya, also consumed by his own arousal, was spreading countless kisses along Kwon Taekjoo's neck, nape and shoulders. He had managed to tame Kwon Taekjoo's hardened flesh, making it soft and pliant, but his lust kept growing with every thrust. The way Taekjoo's quivering walls clung to his cock, pulling it deeper and deeper, gave him a mind-numbing surge of pleasure. The wet, slippery heat of Kwon Taekjoo's inner walls constricted around him, pulling him into an ever-deepening precipice.

Driven by irresistible temptation, Zhenya buried himself inside Kwon Taekjoo before reluctantly pulling back. The tight grip exerted by Kwon Taekjoo's inner walls was so intense that it threatened to swallow his cock whole inside again. He thrust all the way in, pulling out just enough to leave the glans of his shaft wedged inside, then thrust in again with ruthless force, as if he wanted to punish Kwon Taekjoo's tight hole.

Every thrust caused a bulge to rise and fall inside Kwon Taekjoo's abdomen. The continuous friction left Taekjoo's ass and perineal area noticeably reddened from the pounding of Zhenya's cock and balls.

“Aahh, Ah, Zhenya.... Nnghh... Mmm, aaahh, right there ...Mmn yes, more.... uugh...”

“Mmn, that's it, my zainka. It's so good to hear you being honest. Mmn, makes me want to fuck you right where you like it.”

Before Zhenya could even stop talking, he adjusted his position, his cock shifting to hit a completely different spot inside Kwon Taekjoo.

“Aahh...!”

A loud, uncontrollable moan erupted from Kwon Taekjoo; his back arched upward against Zhenya's chest. The relentless grinding of Zhenya's cock against his most sensitive spot caused his rigid limbs to jerk, as if shocks of electricity were coursing through them. His

mouth, open in pleasure, slammed shut as a thick string of saliva slid across his lips. His inner walls convulsed, hungrily devouring every inch of Zhenya's cock.

“Ahh, nngh, ahh...”

“Taekjoo, Taekjoo...”

An irrepressible desire invaded Kwon Taekjoo; the need to melt completely with Zhenya, to intertwine in such a way that not even the slightest space of distance remained between them.

Zhenya rubbed his forehead against Kwon Taekjoo before lifting him off the floor, grabbing him by the waist and thighs. With Kwon Taekjoo clinging to him like a doll, Zhenya stood up, holding him close. Instinctively, Kwon Taekjoo wrapped his arms around Zhenya’s neck, his legs spreading and locking around the man’s waist, pressing their chests together. Kwon Taekjoo quickly regained his senses, realizing his precarious position. The feeling of nearly slipping sent him into a panic.

“Hey! What the hell is this position?... Ugh, I’m going to fall. I’m telling you, I’m going to fall!”

“You won’t slip,” Zhenya assured him, moving in to plant a slow, soft kiss on Kwon Taekjoo’s cheek. The sweet kiss sent a shiver down Kwon Taekjoo’s spine.

“Let me go! It’s uncomfortable, so—ah!”

Kwon Taekjoo's complaints came to an abrupt halt as he let out a muffled cry. Zhenya's cock, which had withdrawn halfway as they switched positions, suddenly thrust back inside him with a force that struck directly into his most sensitive spot. Kwon Taekjoo's head tilted back, his eyes widened in shock as he crossed his gaze with Zhenya's. A small smile tugged at Zhenya's lips as he leaned in and kissed the corner of Kwon Taekjoo's lips. Then, he began to ram into him again with force.

Zhenya's relentless thrusts continued to hit Kwon Taekjoo's sweet spot, causing intense shocks of pleasure to ripple through his body at even the slightest friction. Each upward thrust pulled Kwon Taekjoo off Zhenya's cock, only for gravity to pull him back down and force them closer together. Kwon Taekjoo's own erection, freed from Zhenya's grip, swayed between their bodies, slapping Zhenya's abdomen with every move. Desperately, Kwon Taekjoo tightened his arms around Zhenya's neck, trying to steady himself and thus soften the impact of falling on top of Zhenya's shaft.

However, Kwon Taekjoo’s desperate grip only seemed to spur Zhenya on. Zhenya breathlessly whispered Kwon Taekjoo's name over and over as he fucked him even harder.

“Nnngh aahh aahh mmnnn aah! Nnghh, it hurts... aaahh, mmm, aahh...!”

“Aaah, mmnn, Taekjoo, ahh Taekjoo...”

It felt as if Zhenya was about to pierce through his stomach. A wave of ticklish pleasure surged up to Kwon Taekjoo’s head, gripping every fiber of his body.

“Aaah, nnngh, uuugh, mmmph! Slow down... ahh! Aaah! Why, mmn, do you keep, ahh, hitting... the same spot... ahh! Ugh! Damn it!”

“Ngh, Taekjoo...

“Do you like it like this? Hmm? Haa, Taekjoo...”

Zhenya's relentless thrusts hammered deep into Kwon Taekjoo as he sank his nose into Taekjoo's neck, inhaling his scent. The moans that echoed against his skin were a mixture of pain and passionate longing, as if begging for more. Kwon Taekjoo's head was spinning in overwhelming euphoria. He didn't know if the dizzy feeling was caused by his field of vision moving erratically or the intense heat soaking his body. He was bathed in sweat, his thighs and belly numb as a result of Zhenya's incessant movements. No matter how hard he tried to breathe, he felt breathless.

Gritting his teeth, Zhenya slammed Kwon Taekjoo against the wall. The power of the impact tore a slight whimper from Kwon Taekjoo's mouth. But he barely had time to process the pain... Zhenya's body squeezed him, pinning him down as he continued his powerful thrusts. Kwon Taekjoo couldn't do anything but moan, helplessly caught in the inescapable tide of pleasure as he reached the brink of his own orgasm.

Kwon Taekjoo's head slammed against the wall. Distorted echoes of his own moans bounced through the air, amplified as they crashed against the walls. He struggled to push Zhenya away with his head and back, but his resistance only seemed to stimulate Zhenya's overbearing thirst. Zhenya's thrusts became even more violent and vicious as he deepened the penetration, ravaging Kwon Taekjoo's insides with each powerful plunge.

“Aaah! aaah! Mmnph... nnnggh aaah!!!”

“Mmm, nngnh.... Taekjoo.”

"Stop Ahh, stop! mmn, mmph, nng, nng, shit ugghh! ... Shit, nngh!”

“Aahh, hhaa, mmn, zainka, zainka.... Nng!”

Zhenya's fucking became more desperate, more passionate, until his body finally stiffened. He buried himself deep into Kwon Taekjoo one last time, his cock twitching uncontrollably before releasing a hot spurt of semen. Taekjoo's internal walls squeezed around Zhenya's shaft, amplyfing the pleasure that coursed through his body. Taekjoo squeezed his eyes shut, trying hard to endure the almost unbearable shocks of pleasure that continued to rack his body.

His throat was sore from the sobs and moans he hadn't been able to hold back, to the point where he could almost taste blood on his tongue. When he finally let out the labored breaths he'd been stifling, the burning in his throat was so sharp that he could barely speak.

“Ahh, aah... Mm... Crazy bastard...”

“...Taekjoo.”

Zhenya rained kisses down on Kwon Taekjoo’s neck and shoulders, holding him in his arms, even murmuring Kwon Taekjoo’s name tenderly. Kwon Taekjoo was so exhausted that everything felt unreal, like a dream. He struggled to open his heavy eyelids, but everything around him remained blurry as deep drowsiness and a shivering chill overtook him.

“Mmn... I want to bathe.”

“Okay.”

Surprisingly, Zhenya agreed without hesitation. However, despite his words, he didn't release Kwon Taekjoo or pull out his cock. Instead, he stood there, holding Kwon Taekjoo against the wall, his gaze drifting to the evidence of Kwon Taekjoo's release on the wall. He let out a chuckle.

“You came on the wall? It's a masterpiece.”

“Who do you think made me do--...? Ouch.”

Kwon Taekjoo's protest was interrupted as Zhenya's supple member pressed against his sensitive hole, before sliding out. The sensation was followed by a slow trickle of cum dripping down to the floor, forming a white stain on the surface. Kwon Taekjoo stared at it for a moment before grabbing Zhenya by the ear, pulling him in for a kiss. Zhenya's ragged breathing finally steadied.

Slowly, Kwon Taekjoo pulled away and looked into Zhenya’s blue eyes, whose pupils were still as dilated as they had been from the start.

"Let’s go to the bathroom first," Kwon Taekjoo murmured, his voice heavy with exhaustion.

Zhenya smiled with satisfaction, simply replying, *"Alright."* Then, he lifted Kwon Taekjoo into his arms and carried him toward the bathroom with light, unhurried steps.

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Chapter End Notes

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[1]: The original sentence was, "하아… 알았어, 택주. 엄마는지 쑤셔 주지," where "엄마" means "Mom" and "쑤셔 주지" translates to "massage" or "poke" in a way that

suggests offering some relief. For a moment, I considered changing ‘mommy’ to ‘daddy’ to give the conversation a more playful, kinky vibe. I even thought about completely altering the line to something like, "Yes, I'll give you whatever you want." But in the end, I decided to leave it as it was!

Yeah, it sounds a little odd, but I think it suits Zhenya’s character to tease Taekjoo for being a “mama’s boy” by using a phrase only a mother would say, lol. Gotta love his weird ass.

One or the Other

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•SPANISH DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Kwon Taekjoo sprawled out on the bed, his body slick and sticky with sweat, undoing all the effort he had put into his shower. Despite the air conditioner humming in the background, he couldn't seem to cool down. As he stepped out of the bathroom, his legs were so weak and shaky that they could barely hold him up. He had already lost track of how many times he had had sex with Zhenya. Not even animals in heat could withstand the kind of frenzy they had just shared. And it wasn't as if they'd been apart for years... it had only been a week since they last met.

Almost two years had passed since he and Zhenya had started seeing each other. It was enough time for most couples to crave some alone time, but, strangely enough, Kwon Taekjoo's impatience seemed to grow stronger with each passing day. Maybe Zhenya's insatiable sexual drive was rubbing off on him.

A groan escaped his lips as he rolled over onto his stomach, his hips sore from the relentless pressure they had endured. But worse than the pain was the feeling of the sheets sticking to his clammy skin. All he could do was frown because he was too exhausted to do anything but catch his breath. His mind was hazy, his vision blurry, and dizziness swirled around in his head.

Blindly, he reached for the other side of the bed, but found it empty. The sound of running water came from the bathroom. The bastard had screwed him until he was nearly unconscious, and now he was enjoying a nice shower by himself.

Unable to resist the overwhelming fatigue, his eyelids drooped. Sleep began to take over as his consciousness faded little by little. By the time he lost track of time, the steady sound of

the water stopped. Moments later, he sensed Zhenya's presence as he opened the bathroom door and stepped out.

For a moment, Zhenya's gaze lingered on Kwon Taekjoo's figure before quietly leaving the room. From outside, the faint clatter of dishes could be heard. For some reason, though it disturbed Kwon Taekjoo's rest, it didn't irritate him as much as he thought it would.

A few minutes later, Zhenya returned, casting a large shadow over Kwon Taekjoo's face. The bed dipped under the weight, and the cold touch of a glass pressed against Kwon Taekjoo's cheek. In his drowsiness, Kwon Taekjoo let out a chuckle, realizing this had become part of their little routine.

"... Now you won't even let me sleep?" Kwon Taekjoo murmured as he opened his eyes. His voice was hoarse and rough from fatigue. He cleared his throat a few times, but it didn't help much.

"I thought you said you wanted a drink earlier."

"Yeah, but... calmly."

"Could it be any calmer than this?"

Kwon Taekjoo let out a soft sigh and grabbed the glass of whiskey swirling in front of him. Groaning, he struggled to sit up.

Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taekjoo by the shoulder and turned him around, pressing his lips to his in a kiss. The strong taste of cigar smoke entered Kwon Taekjoo's mouth, making his already sore throat worse. Instinctively, he pushed Zhenya's arm away in disapproval, but Zhenya just laughed and took another drag from his cigar. In the past, the mere smell of the smoke would have gotten on his nerves and given him a headache. But now, the familiar aroma seemed to calm him, perhaps because of his connection to Zhenya.

Kwon Taekjoo watched Zhenya intently over the rim of his whiskey glass, taking a slow sip. Zhenya's skin seemed to glow more than usual, probably because he had just come out of the shower. He showed no signs of exhaustion, but there was an unusual calmness in his demeanor.

Between the two of them, Kwon Taekjoo was undoubtedly the more active one in bed. But lately, the gap in their stamina was becoming more and more noticeable. It wasn't just because Zhenya was younger—after all, it wasn't like Kwon Taekjoo was ten years older—but it seemed as if Zhenya had been blessed with a greater endurance.

"What are you thinking, Taekjoo?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're looking at me like you want to bore a hole in my skull. Am I that pretty?"

Zhenya tilted his head with a mischievous smile. His pale blonde hair slipped across his smooth forehead, still damp with droplets of water. Kwon Taekjoo clicked his tongue in

reproach as he watched him.

“You always say that. Don’t you get embarrassed?”

“Seems like a lot embarrasses you when we know each other inside and out.”

Zhenya’s hand caressed his warm, flushed cheek. Kwon Taekjoo flinched at the unexpected coolness of his touch. Maybe Zhenya had taken a cold shower. His hand slowly slid down to Kwon Taekjoo’s neck, drawing a low moan from him. The hairs on his back and neck stood on end.

“Even if you don’t say it, I already know what you like and what you want me to do,” Zhenya murmured, his hand continuing downward.

His fingers grazed beyond Kwon Taekjoo’s collarbone, tracing the curve of his chest. Then, without warning, Zhenya squeezed one side of his chest, digging his fingers in firmly. At the same time, Zhenya’s lips gently pressed against Kwon Taekjoo’s forehead in a tender kiss, completely at odds with the roughness happening below. It was as if the two movements were entirely disconnected—his face soft and affectionate, while the rest of him remained ruthless and powerful. Even Zhenya’s appearance reflected this contrast, as a face so delicate didn’t quite match the hard, muscular body beneath.

For a brief moment, Kwon Taekjoo decided to let Zhenya do whatever he wanted with him. Zhenya’s fingers found Kwon Taekjoo’s swollen nipple and began to rub it. Kwon Taekjoo’s shoulders tensed at the sensation. It was hard to tell whether it was pain or pleasure he was feeling. Zhenya’s gaze locked onto the bite marks he had left on Kwon Taekjoo’s skin. His tongue unconsciously ran over his lower lip as his throat quivered. Sensing the shift in Zhenya’s mood, Kwon Taekjoo quickly pushed his hand away before things could escalate further.

“Stop groping me. It hurts, you bastard.”

“What? Your tits hurt just because I touched them a little?”

“Tits...? What?”

That filthy mouth of Zhenya’s seemed more in sync with the lower half of his body than with his pretty face. Kwon Taekjoo gave his cheek a light pinch as if to scold him.

“You’d look so much more damn pretty to me if you cleaned up that mouth of yours.”

“What did you say?”

“You still don’t understand what I’m saying in Korean? If you’re that curious, then learn the damn language,” Kwon Taekjoo teased, flashing a smile.

He then held out a hand in front of Zhenya’s face. Zhenya immediately understood the hint and handed him the cigar he had been smoking. Kwon Taekjoo took it without hesitation, inhaling deeply. The thick smoke traveled down his throat and settled heavily in his lungs.

In the past, Kwon Taekjoo would've taken just a couple of puffs before setting it aside. But now, he calmly enjoyed his whiskey with the cigar nestled between his fingers. Zhenya flashed him a sweet smile as he lit another cigar.

"You've turned it into a habit, haven't you?"

"It's been on my mind for a while, since I haven't smoked in a long time."

Kwon Taekjoo twirled the cigar between his fingers, examining it closely before bringing it back to his lips.

"Although, of course, the cigar isn't the only thing on my mind."

As Kwon Taekjoo spoke, his dark eyes locked on Zhenya through the hazy smoke of the cigarette. Zhenya carefully savored his words before a smile curved his lips. Holding his own cigar between his teeth, he climbed onto the bed, spread Kwon Taekjoo's legs, and positioned himself between them.

"You're getting all soft on me again. What happened? Did you get some praise at work for completing your mission successfully?"

"Well, something like that."

"That's good."

"Good for me. But I'm not sure if it is for you."

Zhenya tilted his head at Kwon Taekjoo's cryptic comment. Kwon Taekjoo stared at him, then swallowed the rest of the whiskey in his glass. He toyed with the empty glass for a moment before speaking.

"Hey…"

Kwon Taekjoo paused, a rare moment of insecurity crossing his face, something unusual for him.

Zhenya's blue eyes swept over Kwon Taekjoo's face, observing him closely with a serious expression. After a while, his features softened into a curious smile.

"What's going on this time?"

"This time?"

"You always give me that look when you're about to break bad news. And you've been hinting that you have something to say. Did they assign you another mission?"

"No, it's not that."

"Oh no? Then what is it?"

Zhenya's confusion was evident in his gaze. Even his playful smile faded as he analyzed Kwon Taekjoo's face. His eyes lingered on Kwon Taekjoo's lips, eager to uncover the source of his anxiety. Kwon Taekjoo opened and closed his mouth a few times before letting out a sigh.

"I need this to stop."

Zhenya's face twisted in shock, clearly taken aback by such an unexpected response.

"What do you mean, Taekjoo?"

"I need you to stop interfering with my work."

Zhenya's tense expression relaxed slightly as he processed Kwon Taekjoo's explanation. Then, he let out a soft sigh, tinged with what seemed like relief.

"When have I ever interfered with your work?"

"Don't play innocent, you idiot."

Zhenya slowly leaned back from Kwon Taekjoo, still looking perplexed, as if it was hard for him to understand.

"Regardless of whether you think I'm interfering or helping, why are you so against me being involved? All I do is make things easier for you. None of it could ever hurt you."

"That's true if we're only thinking about me. But that's not the whole problem."

"It's not the whole problem?"

Did he really not know? Ever since he moved to Korea, Zhenya had meddled in Kwon Taekjoo's missions countless times. Sometimes, Zhenya would even arrive at the mission site before Kwon Taekjoo, intercepting key documents or crucial information that Kwon needed… all so he could spend more time with Kwon. With Zhenya's help, Kwon Taekjoo's missions had become child's play, allowing him a break from his once frantic life.

But all of this was a blatant violation of NIS regulations. Moreover, as a foreign diplomat, Zhenya was even more vulnerable to scrutiny and external controversy. That's why Kwon Taekjoo had always been bothered by Zhenya's interference, regardless of how successful the missions turned out.

There had been several times when Kwon Taekjoo was furious with Zhenya for treating his missions like a joke. After many arguments, Zhenya had opted to help Kwon more indirectly, as he had done in Cuba. Zhenya seemed annoyed now by Kwon's insistence on denying him even this discreet support.

"So, you're saying you just want me to sit back and do nothing while my lover is in danger?"

"I took on this job fully aware of the risks it involves. Besides, before we met, I managed just fine on my own."

Zhenya let out a laugh of disbelief. He seemed angry, as if Kwon Taekjoo had unilaterally decided that Zhenya was no longer allowed to play a game he had already committed to and had told him to leave.

"So, you're saying I'm just getting in your way?"

"Don't twist my words. What I'm saying is that you shouldn't put yourself in danger because of me."

"Put myself in danger? Me?"

Zhenya once again looked at Kwon Taekjoo, as if he had just said something completely illogical. He seemed convinced that nothing like that could ever happen to him.

With a long sigh, Kwon Taekjoo fixed his gaze on Zhenya, whose expression remained cold and unyielding. The icy look in his eyes and the tight set of his lips reminded Kwon of a sulking child. He couldn't help but wonder how long he would have to console this 30-year-old man as if he were a small child. Kwon Taekjoo started to explain again, even as he let out another sigh.

"Do you think I don't know about your relationship with your family? Look, I'm not going to tell you how to deal with them or pressure you to make amends. That's your business, not mine. But I can't keep watching you create more conflicts with them just for my sake."

"Taekjoo, you're misunderstanding something. Even if you weren't in the picture, my relationship with them is beyond repair. They're insignificant people who wouldn't dare to interfere with my life."

"Regardless of that, your roots are with them," Kwon Taekjoo said calmly, leaving Zhenya momentarily speechless.

Zhenya's lips parted, almost as if he were about to smile, but only one corner of his mouth twitched. He seemed utterly furious at the undeniable fact that he belonged to Russia and the Bogdanov family.

Fearing that Zhenya might misunderstand him, Kwon Taekjoo quickly added, *"And I chose to accept you as you are, fully aware of all that."*

"What are you trying to say? Why are you making an issue out of something I can't even change?"

"I'm not making it an issue, you idiot. I just wanted to address it because it's something that will weigh on my mind for as long as I keep working for the NIS. The root of the problem will never go away, but I can't stand by and do nothing about it. Like my mother, I want you to stay by my side longer, without having to worry about anything."

Kwon Taekjoo felt like he had just confessed something embarrassing, but Zhenya's face remained cold. He simply frowned, focusing on trying to grasp the true meaning behind Kwon's words.

"What are you hiding from me, Taekjoo?"

"I'm not hiding anything."

"No, something definitely happened, didn't it?"

"I'm telling you, nothing happened. I've been thinking about this for a while, but I never brought it up. I've been too comfortable for too long, but now I think I'm finally coming to my senses."

"Ha... Taekjoo. Do you really think I wouldn't notice if you were hiding so-...?"

"Don't start looking for excuses to come after me. Don't try to figure out what I'm doing when I'm not around. This is how it's supposed to be."

Zhenya furrowed his brow once again. He understandably seemed confused by the sudden distance Kwon Taekjoo was putting between them, especially when they had just been passionately making love. Kwon Taekjoo reached out and tousled Zhenya's fringe in a small gesture to ease the tension in the air.

"All I need from you is to be a loving partner, you bastard."

Suddenly, Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taekjoo's arms, his intense blue eyes locking onto him without blinking. He seemed anxious at the serious and determined tone of Kwon Taekjoo's words. For Zhenya, it was hard to accept what Kwon Taekjoo was saying when he still didn't understand why.

"Don't tell me you're actually worried about my wretched excuse for siblings. You're being too self-absorbed, Taekjoo. Even if you weren't around, nothing between them and me would have changed. What exactly are you saying you did to make things worse?"

"I won't die," Kwon Taekjoo suddenly declared to Zhenya, who still seemed reluctant to easily accept his resolve. Despite the blush that had risen to his cheeks, Kwon remained steadfast, continuing to reassure him.

"Just trust me, will you? I won't recklessly throw myself into danger again. If you just wait for me, I'll come back to you, alright?" he insisted, demanding a response from Zhenya.

Zhenya gave him a reproachful look, clearly pained. It was as though he struggled to decide how to react, too angry to agree, yet unable to unleash his fury on Kwon Taekjoo.

"I'm not saying we have to do this forever, so calm down, idiot. I'll keep thinking about a solution. Worst case, I'll accept fewer missions."

"Fewer missions? As if you'd ever do that."

"Ugh, you bastard, you're so damn skeptical about everything. I always keep my promises, no matter what."

Despite Kwon Taekjoo's repeated efforts to placate him, Zhenya shook his head in defiance. Kwon responded with a mischievous smile, trying to lighten the mood.

"What? You still think I'm not trustworthy?"

Zhenya's hardened expression softened, and a smile spread across his lips, easing the tension between them.

"I always knew you were a cynic, but this is going too far."

Kwon Taekjoo reached out, gently cupping Zhenya's chin, and leaned in to give him a soft, tender kiss on the lips. Their mouths met without force, in a calm, sweet kiss that brought a pleasant warmth to their skin. Zhenya looked at him in confusion, as if surprised by the unexpected turn of events.

"Consider it a down payment for now," Kwon Taekjoo joked with a grin.

In the next instant, Zhenya lunged at him. They rolled together, their limbs intertwining in a heated rush. The glass in Kwon Taekjoo's hand slipped, and the whiskey bottle and ashtray on the table rattled with the force of their movements. The amber liquid splashed onto their bodies, soaking the sheets and their skin, but neither of them seemed to care. All that mattered was their overwhelming desire to touch and overpower each other. Their worries and conflicts were completely forgotten in the intense heat of the moment.

Kwon Taekjoo drifted in and out of consciousness repeatedly. Throughout his heated confrontation, his body fluctuated between dampness and brief moments of clarity, only to become sticky again. Every time he opened his eyes, he could feel the heavy breathing and desperate movements of a man starving for him. Each nerve in his body twisted under the intense sensations overwhelming him. Rapid breaths, mixed with uncontrollable moans, escaped his open mouth. He tried to maintain composure, but the overwhelming pleasure pushed him beyond his limits, causing him to completely collapse. It felt like his brain would boil over and melt into a puddle if he didn't pass out soon.

It was impossible to know how much time had passed after all that. He couldn't even tell if it was day or night. For some reason, it felt like days had gone by, though it also seemed like only a couple of hours. In the haze clouding his mind, Kwon Taekjoo occasionally caught snippets of Zhenya's voice. He seemed to be talking on the phone with someone.

"If you're asking about Taekjoo, there's no need to worry. He's sleeping like a log. Mmh, I'll call you back later."

Kwon Taekjoo could have misheard, but he would swear it was his mother's voice on the other end of the line. Zhenya quickly ended the call and tossed the phone aside. His silhouette moved in the dim light, lingering at the edge of Kwon Taekjoo's vision. With great effort, Kwon Taekjoo forced his eyes open.

An incomprehensible sight greeted him as his vision cleared. Zhenya was firmly seated between his legs, his hands covered in surgical latex gloves. His gaze was blatantly fixed on

the space between Kwon Taekjoo's thighs.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, you're awake?"

Zhenya's eyes met Kwon Taekjoo's with the same casual tone as always. Kwon Taekjoo tried to sit up, but he remained still. His arms were tied behind his back, and a leather belt was cinched tightly around his waist. He squirmed in place, trying to process what was happening, but even that was difficult as his limbs were completely immobilized. The leather cuffs securing his wrists to the belt made any further movement impossible.

Kwon Taekjoo shot Zhenya a confused look.

"What the hell is all this?"

"You said you'd give me a birthday present. I thought long and hard about what I wanted, something I'd never forget for the rest of my life," Zhenya responded indifferently, spreading Kwon Taekjoo's legs even wider. He stroked the inside of Kwon Taekjoo's thigh with his thumb.

"You told me not to interfere with your work in any way. No phone tapping, no GPS tracking. So, what else could I do?"

Suddenly, Zhenya tugged at the skin he had been caressing and looked up to meet Kwon Taekjoo's eyes.

"My only option is to leave my mark."

"What the hell are you...?"

Stunned, Kwon Taekjoo struggled to look down at his thighs. His arms were tied behind him, forcing his chest up and making it hard to see, but he could just make out something in Zhenya's hands. There was a faint, familiar mechanical buzzing sound. Was it a tattoo machine?

Kwon Taekjoo looked up at Zhenya with a sharp, anxious glare. Zhenya simply smiled in satisfaction and gave him a blunt reminder.

"Taekjoo, this is something only you can give me, and I want it too. Don't you think it's the perfect birthday gift?"

"No. Absolutely not. If you tattoo me, it could cause problems later."

"You're still worried about work, even now?"

"It's not just about work, you idiot. You want to put something permanent on my body without my consent? Do you even know what I went through to get the last one removed?!"

“Yes... there wasn’t a trace left,” Zhenya snapped, lowering his gaze. His smiling lips thinned into a tight line, just as they always did when something upset him.

He had no right to be angry about Kwon Taekjoo removing the previous tattoo without telling him, especially since Zhenya had forced it on him in the first place. And yet, there he was, clearly resentful.

“Stop playing around and untie me.”

“Who’s playing?”

Zhenya’s lips twisted into a grin as he firmly pinned Kwon Taekjoo’s legs with his knees.

“This won’t cause you any problems. In fact, it might even serve as a protective charm.”

“A protective charm? Stop with the nonsense, you bastard.”

“You said you wouldn’t die.”

“...What? Why are you bringing that up now?”

“If you want me to believe your fragile promise, don’t you think it’s only fair that I have a symbol, something to reaffirm your vow to me?”

The idea of calling a simple tattoo a “symbol” or “charm” didn’t make much sense to Kwon Taekjoo. Still, it was hard to outright reject Zhenya’s request when he claimed it was his birthday wish, something only Kwon Taekjoo could give him. On the other hand, Zhenya had promised not to interfere with Kwon Taekjoo’s missions anymore if he just got a tattoo. It was an unspoken rule for NIS agents to avoid visible tattoos, but maybe something small would be acceptable. Conflicting thoughts swirled in Kwon Taekjoo’s head.

After a long pause, he finally spoke.

“...Don’t complain about this later.”

“Ah, Taekjoo, as if I complain as much as you.”

“Don’t put it anywhere visible.”

As if it were ridiculous, Zhenya ignored his concern. Then, he lifted Kwon Taekjoo’s legs and slowly, deliberately drew a line over the muscle on the inner part of his thigh, a spot intimately close to his groin.

“Why would I put it somewhere visible? No one but me should ever be able to see it. Unless you’re showing off, Taekjoo.”

“Showing off? Do you even have the right to say that?”

“Who has more right than me? I’m in the prime of my youth, dating a partner I can’t even get pregnant. Doesn’t that make me the most loyal, the most faithful lover? I’ve never been this

patient in my life."

Kwon Taekjoo was left speechless. Patient? Zhenya was anything but patient. Once he set his mind to it, he'd always go at Kwon Taekjoo until he was practically dead. Yet, as far as Kwon Taekjoo knew, Zhenya hadn't looked at anyone else since being allowed into his life. For a man used to switching sexual partners on a whim, Kwon Taekjoo had to admit that Zhenya had been pretty faithful to him. Of course, he couldn't know if Zhenya had been with someone else while Kwon Taekjoo wasn't watching, but he couldn't shake the feeling that Zhenya had never actually cheated on him, even if it was just blind trust.

As Kwon Taekjoo cursed himself for being so lenient, he added another strict condition. *"The tattoo can't be anything that reveals my identity."*

"I know."

"And it can't be too big, either."

"Sure," Zhenya replied without much enthusiasm, quickly getting to work on the preparations.

Ignoring Kwon Taekjoo's growing excitement, he rubbed disinfectant over his skin with a swab. The cold sensation made Kwon Taekjoo's body tense up. The leather cuffs around his wrists rattled with the slightest movement.

"Hey. If you're going to do this, at least untie me."

"It's better if you stay tied up. If you move even a little, my hand might slip. Then I'd have to tattoo something much bigger to cover the mistake."

Zhenya shot him a warning glance, silently asking if that's what he wanted. It was an absurd threat, but Kwon Taekjoo had no reason to refuse.

Kwon Taekjoo stiffly lifted his head and glanced down at his lap. All he could see was Zhenya's face, unusually focused for once, and his hand holding the tattoo machine.

"Anyway, what are you tattooing on me?"

"Who knows? Just lie down and wait."

Zhenya tugged Kwon Taekjoo's legs, laying him flat on the bed. He stretched the skin with his fingers. Kwon Taekjoo stared helplessly at the ceiling, bracing himself for the impending pain.

Moments later, a sharp sting spread across his thigh. His cock twitched in response to the sharp, searing pain. He gritted his teeth, trying to endure it, but despite his efforts, a few soft whimpers escaped him.

"Uugh... aah... damn, this burns."

"There's no way you're already moaning."

“Agh, stop talking and just finish already! Uugh...”

“Hurrying me won’t do you any good, Zainka. You should learn to be more patient,” Zhenya teased, his voice filled with satisfaction. What a pervert, taking pleasure in causing someone else pain.

Kwon Taekjoo squeezed his eyes shut. He’d endured torture before during his missions, returning with countless wounds, both large and small. Compared to that, getting a tattoo should have been nothing more than a tickle. But maybe because of the current circumstances, or because Zhenya was stimulating a part of him that wasn’t trained to handle pain, his body kept flinching on its own.

Every now and then, Zhenya would look up to observe his reactions as he meticulously drew the tattoo. Then, he let out a small laugh. Kwon Taekjoo’s eyes shot open at the sound. He hadn’t misheard Zhenya because he could clearly see his shoulders shaking with laughter.

“What? Why the hell are you laughing like that? You bastard, did you tattoo something weird on me?”

A wave of panic surged through Kwon Taekjoo, and he shot up, but with his arms restrained, he could only lift his chest halfway. He tightened his torso to keep himself upright and looked down at his groin. Through his blurry, shaky vision, he caught a glimpse of the tattoo Zhenya had engraved on him.

This time, it wasn’t an image but text. Since it was handwritten in Russian and Kwon Taekjoo’s view was limited, it was hard for him to make out the word exactly.

And if that wasn't enough, a sharp pain in his crotch prevented him from concentrating, his cock was erect and twitching from the persistent poking and prodding.

Zhenya looked at his erection and smiled in pleasure.

"Taekjoo, don’t you think you enjoy pain a little too much?"

"Enjoy pain? I’m just overly sensitive to the slightest touch thanks to someone who pushed me to my limit."

“Mmh? How naughty of you.”

“Yeah, whatever, you have no right to say that, bastard.”

“Why are you so angry? It’s much better for you now that you're sensitive to my touch.”

Suddenly, Zhenya stroked his erection, causing a throbbing pain to ignite at the point of contact and spread through his crotch. A drop of pre-seminal fluid pooled on his glans before dripping onto his stomach.

"Oww... damn bastard..."

"There you go insulting me again. Admit it, deep down you’re craving it."

"Aaah, just stop talking and let's finish this already."

"Hold on a little longer. I'm almost done."

After calming Kwon Taekjoo, Zhenya's hand returned to his task. He focused all his concentration and effort on meticulously engraving each letter onto Kwon Taekjoo's skin. Watching Zhenya's intense dedication, his face transformed into a mask of focus, stirred an unusual sensitivity within Kwon Taekjoo. He was certain Zhenya had never concentrated so hard on anything, not even his duties as an official. To Zhenya, everything in the world was boring and tiresome. But whenever it came to anything related to Kwon Taekjoo, he gave it his all. Should Kwon Taekjoo feel happy about that?

"Isn't it fascinating?"

"Mnn... what is?"

"I'm giving you another tattoo, just like before. But instead of resisting or begging me to kill you, you're voluntarily and obediently opening your legs for me."

"Ha. Voluntary and obedient? Where are you getting that from?"

"Isn't that how it is? That's how it seems to me."

What kind of ridiculous logic was he going to present now? Kwon Taekjoo shot Zhenya a disapproving look. Zhenya glanced up after stroking his warm skin, meeting Kwon Taekjoo's gaze. His blue eyes were in a trance, filled with euphoria.

"If I untie you, will you try to stop me again?"

Zhenya's voice was laced with amusement, but it didn't feel like he was mocking Kwon Taekjoo. It was more like he was completely enchanted by him. Kwon Taekjoo's vision blurred at Zhenya's ecstatic smile, even though he saw Zhenya's face nearly every day. He didn't even dare respond to his smug comment.

Zhenya flashed another smug grin, as if the situation proved his point, and finally declared, *"It's done."* The unbearable mechanical hum of the tattoo machine stopped entirely, though the pain Kwon Taekjoo felt lingered. The tender skin where the new tattoo lay still burned and throbbed.

"Uugh... what a strange fetish you have. Now untie my arms too."

"We'll see."

"What the hell are you planning to do now?"

Kwon Taekjoo grew uneasy, his body on high alert. Letting Zhenya get away with one thing would only lead to him demanding countless more. Kwon Taekjoo wondered if he'd been spoiling him too much lately.

"No."

Kwon Taekjoo’s rejection was instant and firm, even though he had no idea what Zhenya might ask for.

“No?” Zhenya repeated with a smug smile. Slowly, he leaned forward over the bed, hands on either side, his gaze drifting over Kwon Taekjoo’s body until it finally settled on his face.

The reddened glans of Kwon Taekjoo's quivering cock rubbed against Zhenya's abs. Zhenya smiled wickedly as his gaze finally settled on his crotch. His eyes wandered deliberately over every inch of Kwon Taekjoo's body. Perhaps it was due to the growing arousal spreading through his body, but Kwon Taekjoo's already bulky chest was rising and falling with rapid breaths.

“Someone once told me that the time, place and circumstances of a shared memory could make someone feel fond of you.”

Suddenly, Zhenya repeated the words Kwon Taekjoo had once said to him a long time ago, while smiling contentedly. He was the incarnation of a demon wearing the face of an angel. Kwon Taekjoo watched him anxiously as Zhenya ducked his head and slowly stretched out his tongue, the sharp tip coming menacingly close to his swollen nipple. Kwon Taekjoo's fists clenched against his will as he bit his lower lip.

It looked like Zhenya was going to engulf his nipple at any moment, but instead he pressed his lips against the curve of his chest. The slight brush of his lips was enough to make Kwon Taekjoo's nipple twitch.

Zhenya let out a provocative chuckle and began placing wet, smacking kisses around Kwon Taekjoo's nipple, his tongue running along the opposite side of his chest. Each gentle caress left Kwon Taekjoo's nipple throbbing impatiently.

Once again, however, Zhenya's lips toyed around the untouched area where Kwon Taekjoo desired, turning Kwon Taekjoo's anxiety into frustration.

“Shit, let go of me.”

Zhenya interrupted his attentions to reply with absolute nonsense. *“I heard there's a Korean saying 'if you give someone a disease, then you should give them medicine'.”* He raised his head to meet Kwon Taekjoo's glare.

“I branded pain into your skin with fire, so why don't I give you some sweet pleasure as well?” he whispered to him in a mocking tone, opening his mouth wide.

For some reason, the inside of his mouth looked redder and slicker than usual. Kwon Taekjoo couldn't help but swallow hard, as his throat trembled. Just before Zhenya's mouth landed on Kwon Taekjoo's expectant nipple, another kind of feeling engulfed his crotch. Zhenya's hand had encircled his cock, causing Kwon Taekjoo's abdomen to convulse on the spot.

Zhenya lowered his gaze and laughed, then took Kwon Taekjoo's nipple into his mouth without hesitation, sucking it eagerly. At the same time, his hand began to slowly stroke

Kwon Taekjoo's erection. The combined sensations overwhelmed Taekjoo, causing him to throw his head back, his body jerking in response to the intense attack from above and below.

"Aaah, nngh... Aahhh..."

"Ngh, Taekjoo..."

Zhenya let out a moan next to Kwon Taekjoo, as he savored his flesh. Slowly he began to rub his thick, stiff cock against Kwon Taekjoo's thigh, which was already sensitive from the recent tattoo. Kwon Taekjoo struggled to maintain his concentration, torn between the continuous, unmistakable pleasure and the sharp, nagging pain.

"Aaah, nngh, mmn.... Taekjoo..."

"Mmnh, mmnn, uugh..."

Zhenya began to thrust against Kwon Taekjoo harder and harder, his mouth pulling and nibbling Kwon Taekjoo's nipple with increasing intensity. The mattress supporting their bodies bounced with Zhenya's movements, and the bed frame creaked in unison. Kwon Taekjoo's head was spinning from the incessant shaking.

Immersed in their shared arousal, they pressed against one another before fully intertwining again. They clung to each other desperately, trying to feel every bit of their hot temperature, their intermingled scents, and their ragged breathing.

"Mmnn, uughh.... Yevgeny, aaahh Yevgeny...mnnn aah Zhenya!".

Zhenya stopped his relentless movements as Kwon Taekjoo moaned over and over for his name; his mouth opened, releasing Kwon Taekjoo's breast. He stared intently at Kwon Taekjoo. The head of his cock stopped rubbing eagerly against Kwon Taekjoo's inner thigh and twitched, as if it too was confused.

Kwon Taekjoo, bleary-eyed and dazed, rested his gaze on Zhenya. Looking completely exhausted, he begged in quick gasps.

"Let go of my arms."

The rough and hoarse tone of Kwon Taekjoo's voice, his calm eyes now devoid of anger, the soft and almost pleading tone of his request, seduced Zhenya. Possessed, Zhenya looked at Kwon Taekjoo and obediently removed the handcuffs.

With his hands now free, Kwon Taekjoo's fingers went straight for Zhenya's face. It wouldn't have been surprising if Zhenya had flinched, but he only stared unblinkingly at Kwon Taekjoo, who pulled him in for a desperate, eager kiss.

One of their lips must have cracked because the faint taste of blood mixed with the sweetness of their saliva. But it only heightened their greed. They hungrily inhaled each other's breath, as if trying to completely consume it, their tongues and lips intertwining with frantic passion. As they continued kissing, with an intensity enough to numb their lips, Zhenya guided his

cock into Kwon Taekjoo's hole. As soon as his erect cock came in contact with the moistened opening, it was eagerly sucked in. The next moment, Kwon Taekjoo's whole body was jolted.

“Aaahh, mmngg... Aaah...”

A high-pitched, restrained moan escaped Kwon Taekjoo's tight lips. He had reached orgasm the instant Zhenya thrust inside him. Zhenya smirked as Kwon Taekjoo's sticky cum coated his hand. Kwon Taekjoo's inner walls tightened around Zhenya's cock, slowly pulling it deeper inside, as if he was reveling in the sensation. Zhenya's abdominal muscles contracted in response to the intense pleasure, and his mind began to spin.

“Nghh, Taekjoo, Taekjoo....”.

Zhenya hid his face in the back of Kwon Taekjoo's neck as he exhaled a deep sigh. An inexplicable ecstasy came over Kwon Taekjoo as he felt the tingling of Zhenya's warm breath. Zhenya's sharp nose brushed against his neck and ear, savoring the aftertaste of the pleasurable sensation, before pulling away.

Next, he began to fuck him slowly, basking in the sensuality of Kwon Taekjoo's body. Kwon Taekjoo reciprocated with tender kisses on Zhenya's forehead and hair, accepting Zhenya's torrent of unbridled passion feebly, as the air filled with their ragged breaths.

After showering, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed his own clothes from Zhenya’s wardrobe and started putting them on. He had stocked up on spare clothes at Zhenya’s place, knowing that his rarely survived a night with him. It wasn’t just clothes he had brought over. The fridge was full of dishes his mother had prepared for Zhenya, and the bathroom was equipped with his toothbrush and razor. Several household items, from kitchen utensils to slippers, were perfectly paired in twos. By now, it was fair to say they practically lived together.

Kwon Taekjoo was about to leave when he glanced at the bed where Zhenya slept peacefully, for once. After being awake for nearly a day and a half, it wasn’t surprising that even a monster like Zhenya was exhausted. Kwon Taekjoo was sure that if he kept up Zhenya’s relentless pace, he wouldn’t last much longer. If he hadn’t passed out multiple times during their intense sexual encounter last night, he might have ended up in the hospital.

Lost in thoughts as absurd as they were oddly believable, Kwon Taekjoo approached the bed and sat silently at its edge. Zhenya turned toward him, wrapping an arm around his waist.

“Huh? You’re not asleep?”

“I woke up to your sounds. And your scent.”

Zhenya smiled with his eyes still closed, rubbing his forehead against Kwon Taekjoo’s side like a puppy. Kwon Taekjoo found the gesture endearing and affectionate, gently stroking Zhenya’s warm ears.

Zhenya let out a soft moan, submitting obediently to Kwon Taekjoo’s caresses, and then asked in a rough voice, *“Taekjoo, did they call you in for work again?”*

“Not yet. I woke up by chance. Maybe because I had nightmares.”

Kwon Taekjoo looked at the well-behaved Zhenya and ran his fingers over his furrowed brow. Feeling his touch, Zhenya’s face relaxed, his massive body softened, and his breathing grew deeper and more content. Zhenya kept his eyes closed as if afraid to ruin the sweet and tender moment, holding Kwon Taekjoo even tighter.

“That boy showed up in my dreams again last night. The one with light blond hair and blue eyes.”

“Didn’t you say you had nightmares?”

Zhenya chuckled softly. He seemed to know exactly who the boy intruding on Kwon Taekjoo’s dreams was, even with such a brief description.

“They say that when a child appears in your dreams, it’s often a sign of impending misfortune or trouble.”

“I didn’t know you believed in superstitions.”

“It stuck with me because my mother used to warn me about it all the time. Anyway, tell that kid to stop haunting my dreams. That face always stirs up my emotions.”

“They say dreams are a mirror of your subconscious. You’re the one who can’t let go of that boy. What could I possibly do to stop it?” Suddenly, Zhenya’s eyes opened, and he murmured, *“Taekjoo…”*

The same blue eyes from his dream appeared, curved into a smile. *“I must be a very loving partner,”* he remarked cheekily. Kwon Taekjoo gave up on arguing with Zhenya and covered his eyes with his hand.

“Go back to sleep.”

Kwon Taekjoo tried to stand and pull away from Zhenya, but the arms wrapped around his waist refused to loosen, pulling him closer. In the blink of an eye, Kwon Taekjoo was dragged back to the center of the bed.

“You said they didn’t call you in for work. Where are you going?”

“I have to go home now. If I stay away too long, my mother will start to worry.”

“You can go back with me later.”

“Don’t you think it would be weird for her son to come back after two days looking exhausted and smelling exactly like his boss? Even my mom would get suspicious.”

“That little woman seemed quite oblivious to those kinds of things.”

“Oblivious? It’s more like she can’t even imagine it.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, be careful. The day my mom finds out about us, she’s going to disown me.” Kwon Taekjoo sternly warned Zhenya, who still didn’t seem entirely convinced.

“Mmh, I don’t know. She seems to like me a lot more than you think.”

“Yeah, let’s see how much she likes you when she finds out you’re fucking her son.”

“No matter how you look at it, isn’t it beneficial for you? That little woman wants you to have a stable life, Taekjoo. And I’m the only one in the world who can offer you the stability and security you need,” Zhenya replied with a confidence that left no room for doubt. Kwon Taekjoo knew Zhenya wasn’t harboring romantic illusions; it was true, there was no more powerful ally than Zhenya himself.

Kwon Taekjoo let out a small chuckle and ruffled Zhenya’s delicate hair.

“Is that why you tattooed that crap on me? And here I was wondering what you were drawing so carefully.”

“Did you see it?”

“Wouldn’t you have done the same?”

Zhenya lifted his head, nuzzling against Kwon Taekjoo’s hand that stroked his hair. He kissed the back of Kwon Taekjoo’s hand softly.

“But it’s true. You’re my life, my weakness, and my greatest weapon, which makes me the most powerful man in the world.”

Zhenya repeated his usual absurd phrase, one he always reminded Kwon Taekjoo of just when he was about to forget it. He was the owner of ‘Anastasia’… the fact that such an imposing person, someone no one would dare challenge, was now behaving like Kwon Taekjoo’s most loyal dog was both endearing and strangely unsettling.

Kwon Taekjoo shifted his body and gently placed his hand on the pillow beneath Zhenya. When the pillow sank under Kwon Taekjoo’s weight, Zhenya turned his face toward him. Kwon Taekjoo cupped his chin in his hands and gave him a delicate kiss on the lips. Soft, warm breaths mingled between their joined lips. Slowly, Kwon Taekjoo pulled away, leaving Zhenya with a content smile on his face.

“Taekjoo, you’re being unusually affectionate again.”

“I could say the same about you.”

“Is there something you want from me?”

“Besides hoping you’ll stay still? Not really.”

“All your attempts to hold me back only make me more curious. What are you plotting now?”

Kwon Taekjoo gazed carefully into Zhenya's pale eyes. Did he really not know what his family or Russia had planned? It wasn't surprising if he didn't. From what Kwon Taekjoo had observed of him and what Olga had told him, Zhenya was treated as an outcast by his own family.

But Kwon Taekjoo couldn't bear the thought of Zhenya isolating himself even further because of him. He simply didn't want that to happen.

"Anyway, your hyung will leave first."

Kwon Taekjoo ruffled Zhenya's hair one last time before getting out of bed. As he headed for the door, he gave Zhenya his usual warning.

"Ah, don't skip meals. Make sure you eat properly."

Zhenya rested his head on his arm and nodded, replying, *"I will."*

Kwon Taekjoo stopped in his tracks, throwing him a sarcastic look.

"Don't think that'll work on me."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Your pretty face. It won't work on me, so don't try to charm me with it. I've had enough."

Shaking his head, Kwon Taekjoo finally left the room. Zhenya let out a disbelieving laugh behind him.

A few moments later, the front door closed with a soft click. The faint sounds of Kwon Taekjoo disappeared, leaving the house in deep silence. The previously warm and lively atmosphere now seemed quiet and somber.

Zhenya's expression went blank. He smoothed out his tousled hair and tilted his head.

"*Hyung*?"

Remembering the Korean word Kwon Taekjoo sometimes used, he grabbed his phone. After checking its meaning with an online translator, he smiled, satisfied. A gleam of amusement danced in his blue eyes.

As soon as Kwon Taekjoo walked through the front door of his apartment, he heard bits of someone's voice coming from inside. His mother seemed to be on the phone with someone.

Feeling the need for water, he headed to the kitchen and poured himself a glass from the tap. While drinking it, his mother peeked in. Instead of greeting her, he acknowledged her with a small nod. She gave him a brief disapproving glance before returning to her room.

As he gulped down the water, fragments of her conversation floated into the kitchen. She was talking to his aunt in Canada.

Kwon Taekjoo sat at the dining table, waiting for his mother. She soon noticed. Wrapping up the call, she told the other person they would continue the conversation later and then joined him at the table, sitting across from him.

“You’re late.”

“I had to stop by a few places on my way back.”

"You look completely exhausted from working all night. Didn't you say that most of the heavy work was already done?"

“Yes, but Russia has been restless lately, so they’ve increased my workload. There’s not much I can do when the higher-ups tell me to go; I go.”

Kwon Taekjoo had told his mother he’d be working extra hours late into the night. He’d gotten too used to lying to her like this. After telling himself for years that it was for her own good, the guilt barely lingered anymore.

“The ambassador must be tired too, after such a long trip.”

“Bah, it seemed like he was having the time of his life.”

“Huh? Taekjoo, you’re speaking so rudely about the ambassador again...” His mother gasped, horrified.

She was ready to start lecturing him when Kwon Taekjoo slid something across the table. Her eyes widened in surprise.

“What is this?”

“A plane ticket. I left the return flight open so you can change it whenever you want.”

“I’m not asking why you gave me this all of a sudden.”

“Instead of worrying on the phone every day, go visit my aunt.”

“What?”

“You told me she’s undergoing major surgery. I’m sure the operation will go smoothly, but considering her age, the recovery will be tougher than the surgery itself. She’s done a lot for us over the years. You should go support her in person. It’ll also put your mind at ease.”

Kwon Taekjoo had prepared this small gift, seeing how worried his mother was about her sister. She wasn’t tied down by work or household chores, so he hoped she wouldn’t hesitate to go. In reality, he was encouraging her to leave because he knew she was staying only for him. More precisely, she always felt an urgent need to keep an eye on the house in case any family member came home.

As expected, she didn’t accept the offer easily, despite probably having considered it for some time.

“But…”

“You don’t need to worry about the ambassador’s birthday. He doesn’t seem to care much, and I’ll make sure to prepare something nice.”

“Even aside from that, what about you, Taekjoo?”

“What about me? Am I a seven-year-old?”

“I’m not treating you like a child. You’ll have to handle household chores, your work, and all those extra hours… how will you even find time to eat properly? I’m worried you’ll get sick from eating instant ramen every day and staying up too late playing video games.”

“Ah... that’s not something you need to worry about. Besides my healthy body and soul, I’m practically a zombie.”

“You didn’t have to put it like that... Are you sure you’ll be okay without me?”

“Of course. Have you forgotten how old I am? People will start talking if they see you treating me like an abandoned child.” Kwon Taekjoo chuckled lightly, joking.

But his mother continued to look at him with concerned eyes. Carefully, Kwon Taekjoo placed the plane ticket into her hesitant hands.

“Whatever you’re worried about isn’t going to happen. Let’s just try to live a normal life like everyone else. We’ll each do our part and support each other without worrying so much. Agreed?”

Kwon Taekjoo’s mother had made great efforts to control her anxiety and overprotective instincts. She regularly attended therapy and even went to the hospital for treatment when needed. The only reason she was as calm as she was now was thanks to Zhenya. Because of him, Kwon Taekjoo had managed to avoid danger and return home safely on many occasions. Zhenya had also stayed by her side and filled in for his absence when he wasn’t around.

Kwon Taekjoo took her hand in his and gently squeezed it, trying to reassure her.

“Mom, instead of being just someone’s daughter, someone’s wife, or someone’s mother... you need to find a name for yourself. Do the things you want to do, meet the people you’ve been putting off seeing.”

Kwon Taekjoo had always wanted her to have a life for herself, not just for him. He wanted her to prioritize her own desires.

He wondered if he had managed to express his sincerity. Finally, his mother relaxed her shoulders and let out a small laugh. She even tightened her grip on the plane ticket in her hands.

“You’re sure I can leave and that I can trust you, right?”

“Of course. Who else would you trust but me?”

Kwon Taekjoo gave her a confident smile. She returned it with a contented smile of her own and began looking over the ticket. Like an excited child, she started mumbling to herself about where she had put her passport, whether it had expired, and whether she was ready for her first trip abroad. Kwon Taekjoo watched her, pleased.

However, the moment of peace was interrupted by a loud buzzing from his pocket. He checked the caller ID. As usual, his instincts had been right.

It was another call from NIS headquarters.

As soon as Kwon Taekjoo arrived at headquarters, he headed straight for the director's office. Even after letting Kwon Taekjoo in, Director Kwak's eyes remained fixed on the screen in front of him, his expression severe.

"Sir."

"Ah, you're here."

He looked up upon hearing Kwon Taekjoo's voice, and his tense expression softened.

"Did you get some rest?"

"Yes."

Director Kwak nodded and immediately launched into the matter at hand—an unusual occurrence that indicated the gravity of the situation.

"The mission has been authorized."

"When should I leave?"

"Before that, there's something you should know."

"What is it?"

"We'll be coordinating with the United States and Japan for this operation in Vladivostok."

Upon hearing this unexpected news, Kwon Taekjoo immediately asked, "Coordination? Does that mean it won't be a solo mission?"

"Considering how difficult it was to gather the information, it's in our best interest to confirm its validity and handle things quietly on our end. And this way, it's much cleaner. If it turns out to be a false lead, we avoid criticism for raising an unnecessary alarm."

Director Kwak continued explaining in a tone that indicated he fully understood Kwon Taekjoo's concerns.

"But here's the thing... the goal of this mission isn't just to track North Korea's movements. Secret talks between North Korea and Russia could pose a threat to global peace. If that's the

case, we'll be forced to share whatever we find. It's better to involve allied nations now and receive their support than to be accused later of withholding critical information. Especially considering the location—Vladivostok."

It wasn't that Kwon Taekjoo didn't understand what he was saying. Vladivostok was a hotspot for international diplomacy. Ideologically, it was a battlefield between democracy and socialism, and geographically, it served as a link between Europe and Asia. Additionally, it was a hub of high activity for diplomats and agents from various countries. This meant that any espionage operation in that location could easily be discovered by either side. Instead of risking unforeseen interference, the smartest course of action was to cooperate with other allied nations.

However, Kwon Taekjoo preferred working alone—that was the problem. Although Zhenya often helped him, Kwon Taekjoo liked to analyze and resolve situations his way, even if that meant bending the rules. It was because he trusted his instincts more than any pre-planned strategy. It was already irritating enough to be forced to team up with another NIS agent or a specialist from time to time, but now he had to collaborate with foreign intelligence agencies. He didn't like it at all.

"Sir, to be honest, it might look like 'cooperation' on the surface, but it'll quickly turn into an 'every man for himself' situation, with everyone protecting their own national interests."

"I'm aware of that. We're bound to face irregularities and inconveniences. But what choice do we have? The fate of the country is at stake. We can't afford to act on personal whims."

"Aah..."

"However, I'll promise you this: you won't have to interact directly with the foreign agents. We've reached an agreement to keep them on standby, only stepping in if you fail. In the meantime, we can make use of their information. We still don't know what North Korea plans to bring to the table in Vladivostok or what tactics they'll use. Plus, you're only one person. Think of it as having more clones of yourself out there. Besides, doesn't the idea of giving orders to agents from other countries sound a little fun?"

"How could I even trust them in the first place? The moment things get tough, they'll only look out for themselves. I guarantee they'll intervene in whatever way they see fit and end up causing problems. It's happened to me too many times."

"You know, they asked the same question... how was it possible to trust everything to you?"

A sly smile appeared on Director Kwak's lips. Just as Kwon Taekjoo didn't trust them, it seemed they had their own doubts about him. Of course, it was amusing coming from them, considering they were likely aiming for a higher position after stealing information from others. Frustration welled up inside Kwon Taekjoo, but he kept it in check, clenching his fists.

"We'll be handling this mission from start to finish, so don't worry too much. The NIS will fully support your autonomy. But there are a lot of people counting on this operation, so failure is not an option. Understood?"

“...Yes, sir,” Kwon Taekjoo replied reluctantly.

Kwon Taekjoo’s hesitation was evident, but orders were orders. He was blunt, stubborn, and sometimes bent the rules, but he never crossed the line. His sharp survival instincts, honed by the unfortunate circumstances of his family life, also increased his chances of completing the mission successfully. That’s why Kwon Taekjoo had become one of the top agents in the NIS over the past ten years.

Director Kwak turned his tablet toward Kwon Taekjoo, who still seemed wary.

“Let me give you the details of the operation. A few days ago, Kim Gil-ha, a member of North Korea’s General Staff Department, visited the North Korean consulate in Vladivostok. Kim Gil-ha is the secretary of Sim Young-il, the head of operations. It’s likely that he went ahead of Sim Young-il to inspect the area before their upcoming secret conference with the Russians. We’ve also had reports of other strange activity. For one, the Vladivostok Hotel, owned by the Bogdanov family, has stopped accepting reservations for two weeks. The hotel usually hosts government events or banquets, not ordinary guests, but since yesterday, they’ve completely restricted access to visitors and cut off any communication with the outside world. Additionally, we’ve learned that some areas of Russky Island in Vladivostok have been restricted. Apparently, it’s for underground water system maintenance and road repairs, but the timing couldn’t be more convenient, don’t you think?”

“If it’s Russky Island, then...”

“Exactly. That’s where the Far Eastern Federal University is located. They held a North Korea-Russia summit there a few years ago.”

“Would they really meet in a place that’s already been in the spotlight?”

“That might be exactly what they’re going for. If high-ranking officials from both countries meet in total secrecy, it’ll only lead to more speculation about their intentions. But if they claim it’s for technological cooperation, what better cover than a university? We need to keep all possibilities open. That’s why we’re coordinating with foreign intelligence agencies. There are three possible meeting points for the North Korea-Russia talks... Russky Island’s university, the Vladivostok Hotel where the North Korean delegation is staying, and Khasan train station.”

“Khasan?”

“Traveling by plane isn’t the only way to get from North Korea to Russia, you know.”

Khasan was a small town in Russia’s port province, located at the intersection of Russia, North Korea, and China. With a population of just over three thousand, it had gained notoriety after a North Korean leader transferred trains there during a visit to Russia. Russian railways were built with a track gauge of 1520 mm, while North Korea used the standard 1435 mm, meaning passengers had to change trains at Khasan station if they wanted to continue their journey by train. The same went for cargo transport. The constant flow of freight trains passing through the town was evidence of the enduring alliance between North Korea and Russia.

“A field agent reported some suspicious activity in the area. Despite being a military zone, there’s an unusually high number of units stationed there. The surveillance is also tighter than usual.”

The three potential locations for the North Korea-Russia conference were all suspicious. Kwon Taekjoo knew that not even he could cover Khasan, Vladivostok, and Russky Island on his own. It was also highly likely that the support he could receive from the NIS would be limited. He had no choice but to admit that cooperation with foreign intelligence was essential.

In a dejected tone, Kwon Taekjoo asked, “So, should I head to Khasan first?”

“No. There’s already an American agent there, working as a train engineer. He’ll alert us if anything suspicious happens. Our job is to wait at the airport in case the North Korean delegation decides to travel by plane. We’ll also monitor the Vladivostok Hotel, where the delegation will be staying, around the clock.”

“And the Far Eastern Federal University?”

“Japan will take responsibility for that location. Our goal is to track all the delegation’s movements and be prepared to meet the others if they head to the university or any other potential meeting sites.”

“Hmmm... One wrong move, and all our efforts will go down the drain.”

“I trust you won’t let that happen. We’re heading straight into enemy territory, so be prepared.”

“Understood.”

“If you fail, we’ll have no choice but to resort to Plan B. It would be disheartening to see all our hard work fall into someone else’s hands,” Director Kwak added with a bitter laugh.

At first glance, his words seemed straightforward. As if sharing the high-level information the NIS had to disclose to other countries wasn’t enough, they would also end up sharing all their successes and failures. But to Kwon Taekjoo, it sounded more like a veiled warning not to let his relationship with Zhenya ruin the operation. The fact that he was assigned to the hotel owned by the Bogdanov family was probably a kind of test to gauge his loyalty.

Considering past events, Kwon Taekjoo wasn’t at all surprised they suspected him. He had already decided that this time he would keep business and his personal life completely separate. Silently, he clenched his fist.

“I’ll be expecting your results.”

“Thank you. I’ll head out now.”

Kwon Taekjoo picked up the passport they had provided him and quietly left the office. As soon as the door closed, a heavy sigh escaped his lips. His mind was swirling with various thoughts.

He couldn’t let his personal feelings interfere with such a critical operation. If he faltered for even a moment, many people would be hurt.

Was Zhenya really not involved in any of this? If, during the mission, Kwon Taekjoo encountered one of Zhenya’s relatives, he would have to draw his weapon. If Kwon Taekjoo pulled the trigger and harmed one of his family members, would Zhenya really not care? What if Zhenya himself showed up? What if he had been lying about not knowing anything? And if... As Kwon Taekjoo considered more and more possibilities, his mind became flooded with conflicting thoughts.

He shook his head, pushing aside the endless thoughts crowding his mind, inhaling and exhaling slowly to calm his tormented feelings. His expression hardened with determination as he looked up again. If he hesitated, and tightening his lips into a thin line, he strode down the hallway, his shadow flickering under the lights.

At this moment, he could only trust in Zhenya and his own resolve.

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END OF VOLUME 6

Chapter End Notes

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Volume 6 is finally done! Thank you so much for your support, only 4 volumes left!

Hunting Two Tigers

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•SPANISH DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VOLUME 7

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"Hey."

Zhenya opened his eyes with difficulty at the sound of someone calling him. A blurry figure appeared at the edges of his hazy vision. Normally, he would have tensed up at the presence of a stranger, but this time, he remained lying on the bed. A hand reached out toward him, but he didn't dodge it. He simply surrendered to its touch.

The hand on his head began to gently stroke his hair. It was a bit warmer than usual, making it pleasant to the touch.

"Hey, Zhenya," the man called again, this time more softly when Zhenya didn't respond. The hand caressing his hair moved to brush his forehead, almost instinctively.

"I have to go. I'll see you later, okay?"

It was hard to tell if his goodbye was a plea or just a casual farewell. A faint laugh escaped Zhenya's lips. His mouth moved as if he wanted to say something, but he wasn't sure if any sound came out. The only thing he could be certain of was that the shadow above him grew deeper, until soft lips pressed tenderly against his forehead.

"Behave and wait here patiently."

After giving that advice, as if speaking to a child, the man stood up from the bed. His warmth, scent, and breath—everything that felt like an extension of Zhenya's own being—suddenly became distant. Zhenya jolted and instinctively reached out to stop him. The arm he grabbed felt strong and sturdy, as if nothing could easily break it.

In response, the man tousled Zhenya's hair once more. Feeling the reassuring touch, Zhenya slowly let go of the arm and murmured his name, though it was barely more than a whisper. The man's gaze lingered for a moment before he withdrew completely, and his imposing presence vanished. In the distance, the faint sound of a door closing echoed.

It wasn't until long after that Zhenya finally opened his eyes.

"....."

A familiar ceiling came into view. In the large, spacious house, not even the ticking of a clock could be heard. Zhenya sat up abruptly.

"... Taekjoo?"

He looked around but couldn't sense anyone else in the room, except himself. He glanced down at his own body. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, except for his limbs, which felt as heavy as soaked cotton balls. On the contrary, his mind was surprisingly clear and alert.

Now that he thought about it, he couldn't remember how he had fallen asleep the night before. He sat there, rummaging through the fog of his memories.

Kwon Taekjoo had come to his house in the afternoon, his hands full of groceries. Most of them were to fill his empty fridge and pantry.

After that, they'd followed their usual routine: sharing dinner, putting away the dishes, and settling in the living room for some drinks. A movie played in the background, but neither of them was paying attention to it. Kwon Taekjoo had been unusually affectionate that night. He'd suggested they visit Ajinoki Island soon, now that the weather was getting nice, and mentioned a cozy Russian restaurant nearby they could visit together. He'd even asked if there was anything Zhenya wanted to do, a clear sign that bad news was on the horizon.

It was about time for Kwon Taekjoo to be assigned another mission, especially considering how often he had been summoned to the NIS headquarters lately. Zhenya had resolved to enjoy the compliments—or rather, the anticipatory consolations—as much as he could while they lasted.

Zhenya leaned his entire body against Kwon Taekjoo, who was oddly shy that evening. Kwon Taekjoo complained that he was too heavy, but fell silent the moment Zhenya looked at him pitifully, murmuring, *"You're going to leave me alone again."*

Seizing the moment of calm, Zhenya gently pushed him down and kissed him.

Kwon Taekjoo didn't resist, accepting the heated kiss that stole his breath. Even as Zhenya pushed his tongue deep into his throat, all Taekjoo did was occasionally stroke Zhenya's ear

and chin or tap his cheek, signaling him to slow down. Although it was clear he was struggling to breathe, with a vein pulsing on his soft forehead, he continued to kiss back eagerly, sliding his trapped tongue alongside Zhenya's, sucking on it.

Suddenly, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed the collar of Zhenya's shirt in the midst of their passionate kiss, causing them both to tumble off the sofa. With their positions reversed, he straddled Zhenya, hands braced on the floor. Without saying a word, he stared intensely at Zhenya before taking a slow sip of whiskey from his glass. Zhenya's throat tightened involuntarily as he watched, and a throbbing sensation began to build in his groin.

Then, Kwon Taekjoo tilted his head and kissed him, intertwining their lips and letting the whiskey spill into Zhenya's mouth. The warm, fragrant liquor slid down Zhenya's throat, leaving a small object on his tongue... a pill.

Zhenya shot him a questioning look, but Kwon Taekjoo merely breathed against his mouth with a calm expression, urging him to swallow.

Without resisting, Zhenya allowed the pill to dissolve on his tongue and swallowed, feeling it slowly make its way down his throat. Kwon Taekjoo's eyes followed the movement, watching intently. Zhenya smiled with satisfaction, lifting his gaze to meet Taekjoo's once again.

"Taekjoo. What was that?"

"A sleeping pill. It's mild."

Was that supposed to be reassuring? Zhenya chuckled. It was already absurd that he'd drugged his own lover, but now he was casually admitting to giving him a sedative.

And that wasn't even the end of it. As if daring Zhenya to watch, Kwon Taekjoo stuck out his tongue and placed another small pill on it. The contrast of his red, whiskey-slicked tongue against the tiny white pill made Zhenya swallow hard.

Kwon Taekjoo slowly leaned in and licked Zhenya's lips. Unable to watch any longer, Zhenya pulled him in and devoured his tongue completely. The pill dissolved between their hot, entwined tongues, disappearing without a trace.

But even after the pill had vanished, Zhenya kept Kwon Taekjoo's mischievous tongue trapped in his mouth, sucking it forcefully. Kwon Taekjoo's eyebrows knitted as his tongue stretched in tension. He tried to pull away, but Zhenya only tightened his grip and pressed their mouths together harder, as if venting all his pent-up frustration. It wasn't until he tasted the faint trace of blood mixed with their combined saliva that he finally let go.

Panting heavily, Kwon Taekjoo wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then leaned over to Zhenya to wipe the excess saliva off his lips with the edge of his shirt.

"You've become way too relaxed, accepting everything I give you so calmly. What if I'd poisoned you?"

"If it were poison, I would've known. It'd take me just seconds to break your neck."

"Were you serious about that whole 'killing me before you die' thing? How romantic," Kwon Taekjoo muttered, his tone a bit exasperated as he stood up. Zhenya tried to grab him, but his arms barely lifted before falling back down, weak and ineffective. The medication was starting to take effect.

"Come on, get up. You should sleep in bed."

With some difficulty, Kwon Taekjoo managed to pull Zhenya into a sitting position, hefting his limp arm over his shoulder. They stumbled toward the bedroom, nearly tripping with each step. Zhenya pressed his face against Taekjoo's ear and grazed his lips over the tense neck, where a vein bulged from the strain of carrying him.

Kwon Taekjoo protested, *"Are you really in the mood for this right now?"* but Zhenya didn't seem to care.

Finally, Kwon Taekjoo dropped him onto the bed and collapsed beside him, breathing heavily from the effort. Zhenya slowly turned toward him and pulled him close, wrapping a leg around him to keep him from moving.

Kwon Taekjoo squirmed, trying to get free, but it was no use. His scent intensified as his body became soaked with sweat.

"Shit... Was the pill too mild? How are you still this strong?"

With ragged breathing, Kwon Taekjoo laid there, imprisoned. Zhenya went in search of his scent, gently stroking his cheek against his dark locks of hair. The hardness of his erection began to rub insistently against Kwon Taekjoo's thigh.

"Taekjoo... Taekjoo..."

"God, you have so much strength. Let go of me, you bastard. I'll make you feel better. Okay?" Kwon Taekjoo said, gently patting Zhenya's arm.

Then, Zhenya loosened his grip. Kwon Taekjoo sat up and pressed his lips gently against Zhenya's, then spread kisses all over his face. At the same time, he was undressing Zhenya, removing his clothes piece by piece. Zhenya found the situation unfamiliar, but at the same time pleasurable. He had never allowed himself to be completely at the mercy of another person. The only time he had ever let himself fade unconscious in someone else's arms had been one night, long ago, in a rundown motel with Kwon Taekjoo.

Before long, Kwon Taekjoo had gotten down on his knees over his naked body, beginning to masturbate himself with his fingers. He reached down to wrap his hand around Zhenya's rigid cock, rubbing their erections together.

A surge of pleasure spread throughout Zhenya, from his crotch to the rest of his body. His breathing became erratic from the sweet, comforting experience, his body relaxing blissfully.

"Mnn... Taekjoo..."

Between groans, he repeatedly uttered Kwon Taekjoo's name. At that point, his strength had been completely drained away, leaving him only able to blink his eyes with difficulty. Every so often, Kwon Taekjoo leaned over to kiss him affectionately. Zhenya's hips squirmed, longing for something more, but before he could move, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed his cock and slowly let himself fall on top of it.

"...Ugh, Mmn."

"Aah, ahh, Taekjoo."

Although Zhenya was hovering on the verge of unconsciousness, he could still clearly feel the intimate sensation of penetrating Kwon Taekjoo. At first, a tight ache wrapped itself around his cock, so intense that it felt like it was going to slice it in half, but it was immediately replaced by a rush of sweet, overwhelming delight. As a deep moan escaped his lips, Kwon Taekjoo began to ride him gently, his body trembling with his every movement.

"Aaah, aah, nngh..."

"Mmn, Taekjoo.... Taekjoo, mmn, it feels so good."

Zhenya savored the warm sensation through heaving breaths, the pleasure threatening to engulf him completely.

For Zhenya, sex had always been like a hunt. He would fiercely pin down his partner, overpowering them into submission before devouring them. It was akin to the thrilling adrenaline rush he felt when chasing down prey.

But this was different. Despite being the one defenseless beneath Kwon Taekjoo, Zhenya didn't find it unpleasant. In fact, the unfamiliar pleasure sent shivers across his body. Though he wasn't caught in a violent torrent of lust, the slow warmth spreading through him was tender and comforting, making him feel soft tingles in his stomach.

A faint moan escaped his lips. His mouth quivered before his eyelids finally closed. A sliver of consciousness remained, but his body lay still, incapable of doing anything. The last thing he remembered was the image of Kwon Taekjoo arching his back and shaking his hips, followed by a hot splash of semen landing on his face.

"....."

Zhenya ran a hand over his face but found nothing. If last night hadn't been an erotic dream, then Kwon Taekjoo must have cleaned him up before leaving.

He got out of bed with a small chuckle, his mind refreshed after a good night's sleep. The lingering afterglow of sex had left him more rejuvenated than usual.

As he headed toward the kitchen, something caught his eye. On the table sat a plate of microwaveable instant pelmeni. Was it Kwon Taekjoo's intention to make him breakfast? The meal looked pitiful, but Zhenya snickered. For a man like Kwon Taekjoo, the gesture was unexpectedly thoughtful.

In search of some water, Zhenya opened the fridge and found the usual assortment of side dishes prepared by Kwon Taekjoo's mother. She had carefully chosen dishes that wouldn't overwhelm him, steering clear of the fiery Korean meals that tormented his tongue. What Zhenya didn't know was that most of these dishes were meant for a child's palate.

Whenever Kwon Taekjoo brought him food, he would complain, *"My mom made all of this for you, so you'd better eat every last bite. I'll be checking up on you to make sure you do. Got it?"*

Zhenya always found the threat amusing, but he followed Kwon Taekjoo's instructions without protest. He liked the way Kwon Taekjoo seemed proud of him when he found the empty containers and the fact that he had to visit more often to bring fresh food.

Food had always been a basic necessity for Zhenya, merely fuel to keep his body running. He ate when he needed to and skipped meals without a second thought. His body had adapted to this habit—he was never hungry, and his weight stayed stable.

However, in the two years he had been living in Korea, he had gained about ten kilos. It didn't change his physique too much, since everything he ate went straight to his muscles, but the downside was that now, he actually felt hungry whenever he skipped a meal.

"...I should shower first."

He was about to close the fridge when a pan caught his eye. He pulled it out to check the contents but found a sticky note on the lid that read, "Eat it if you want," in Kwon Taekjoo's unmistakable handwriting. Zhenya skeptically inspected the pan before lifting the lid. Inside were scrambled eggs, overcooked to the point of browning.

"Taekjoo, always so adorable," Zhenya muttered to himself as he took a seat at the table.

He pushed the instant pelmeni aside and began to eat the scrambled eggs, which were cold. As expected, they were tough and dry, lacking any softness. He even chewed on a few bits of eggshell. The diced carrots and onions were chopped so finely that he couldn't find a single identifiable piece to chew, though he could still taste them.

As he chewed on the dismal breakfast, Zhenya considered his plans for the day. Normally, he would be tracking Kwon Taekjoo's whereabouts, but he had promised not to, so only one place came to mind.

Zhenya rang the doorbell again. The familiar face he expected to greet him didn't appear, though usually, Kwon Taekjoo's mother would be waiting by the elevator as soon as the intercom announced the arrival of his car. He reached out once more to press the doorbell but stopped.

"Oh..."

He suddenly remembered what Kwon Taekjoo had told him last night while putting the side dishes his mother had made into the fridge.

“My mom will be staying at my aunt’s place for a while.”

At that time, Kwon Taekjoo had explained that his aunt, who lived in Canada, was ill and needed surgery. His mother was going to take care of her and might stay there for a while, depending on how things went. Zhenya had heard him clearly but had forgotten because visiting Kwon Taekjoo’s mom during her absence had become a habit.

Kwon Taekjoo’s mother wasn’t much like her son, but the way she always greeted him with a warm, cheerful smile made Zhenya want to behave his best around her. While it was debatable whether her cooking was as excellent as Kwon Taekjoo claimed, it had definitely helped him get used to Korean food. She was attentive and always ready to provide whatever he needed, which made him feel at ease. Plus, he loved hearing the stories she shared about Kwon Taekjoo’s past—things he’d never hear from the man himself.

Of course, Zhenya didn’t like her just because she was Kwon Taekjoo’s mother; she was genuinely enjoyable to be around. She laughed often, loved to talk, and there was never a dull moment with her. Even just watching her lifted his spirits. But the more he saw her, the more he wondered how she could have given birth to someone like Kwon Taekjoo.

He had been on his way to visit her, looking forward to spending another carefree day with her. But now, standing in front of the door, he felt an unexpected sense of emptiness. Not only was Kwon Taekjoo gone, but the little woman who had often kept him company during dull, lonely times was absent too.

“Mm...”

Zhenya paced aimlessly in front of the door. The boundless energy he had woken up with had vanished, leaving him bored and restless, with nothing to do.

He pulled his phone from his pocket. He was about to open the GPS tracking app, as he usually did, but hesitated.

“Don’t follow me.”

Kwon Taekjoo had already made him promise several times not to do that. It wasn’t unusual for Kwon Taekjoo to scold him, making him stay out of his missions until Zhenya’s ears were practically bleeding, but this time, something had felt different. There was something about the way Kwon Taekjoo kept looking at him, and the tenderness in his actions before leaving, that made it clear something was up. What exactly was Kwon Taekjoo trying to do without him knowing?

It would’ve been so easy to open the app and satisfy his curiosity, but Zhenya kept staring at the app’s icon. After a while, he put his phone back in his pocket.

“I guess I’ll keep that promise for now.”

He had never really bothered with personal promises before. Or rather, no one had ever dared to ask him to make such a thing. So he had no idea what was supposed to happen if he

actually kept his word, or what benefits, if any, might come from it. Honestly, he didn't care too much.

But it was a completely different story if the promise was made to Kwon Taekjoo. He figured he could play the part of an obedient dog for now. What reward would Kwon Taekjoo give him in return? That thought soothed his frustrated emotions.

Zhenya took the elevator down to the basement parking lot, his wide, energetic strides toward his Bugatti feeling light and almost cheerful.

Russian Embassy in the Republic of Korea.

The deafening roar of an engine echoed in the distance, growing louder with each passing second. The employees, engrossed in their usual tasks, paused and looked up, puzzled. They exchanged bewildered glances before collectively heading toward the windows. A few of those seated near the windows stood up for a better view. Moments later, a Bugatti appeared, crossing the main gate.

"What's all the commotion?"

Pavel Menshikov, who had just finished a virtual meeting, scolded the murmuring crowd. One of the staff members, still peering outside, was quick to respond.

"The ambassador is here."

"What? The ambassador?"

Pavel Menshikov's eyes widened. He hadn't even begged Zhenya to show up this time—what could have prompted him to come on his own? Struggling to process this, Pavel hurried out of his office, with the rest of the staff instinctively following behind.

Waiting impatiently for the elevator, Pavel Menshikov tapped his foot on the floor before abandoning the idea entirely and heading for the stairs. The others scrambled to follow him. Their frantic rush made them look like people fleeing from a serial killer.

By the time they reached the lobby, Zhenya was already stepping into the elevator. Pavel Menshikov and the rest of the staff dashed toward him.

"Mr. Ambassador, what in the world brings you-…?"

Pavel Menshikov quickly swallowed his words, bowing respectfully.

"I see you've arrived. Had you informed us you were coming, we would have sent an official car to escort you."

"For what?"

Zhenya's face was filled with irritation, making the situation even more confusing. Despite holding the title of ambassador, Zhenya rarely showed up at work, not even for important

events. He only came reluctantly after repeatedly ignoring Pavel's requests or when his absence threatened to reach the Kremlin's ears. But even then, his presence was cold and suffocating, turning the embassy into a space filled with tension, or he would shut himself away in his office like a dark, stormy cloud.

Pavel couldn't help but be surprised that someone like Zhenya had shown up at the embassy when there wasn't even an event, and especially without anyone pleading for his appearance. Nervously, he glanced at Zhenya, anxious that something serious might be happening, or worse, that Zhenya could stir up trouble.

Though Zhenya had occasionally arrived unannounced before, each time brought with it an overwhelming hostility, cold as the Siberian winter. He would ignore any of Pavel's attempts to engage in conversation and disregard documents needing his approval, opting instead to sit in silence, staring at the wall as if lost in the aftermath of some great argument.

But today, he didn't seem quite as hostile... in fact, he appeared to be in a good mood. Pavel couldn't wrap his head around it.

Zhenya tilted his head at Pavel's persistent gaze.

"Are you getting on the elevator?"

No matter how it sounded, it was clearly a warning not to. Pavel and the rest of the staff let out awkward chuckles and took a step back.

"N-No, it's fine. Please, go ahead, sir."

Zhenya closed the elevator door without hesitation, disappearing from their view. Pavel and the staff exchanged confused looks, unsure what to make of the situation.

After entering his office, Zhenya sat down in his chair. A large pile of documents awaited him on the desk.

"Hmm…"

Lately, Pavel hadn't pressured Zhenya to come to work, so it was unlikely that any of the documents were particularly urgent.

Still, Zhenya picked one up and carefully skimmed through its contents. Just as he suspected, it was a proposal and budget plan for some insignificant event. He glanced at another document, only to find more of the same.

The Russian Embassy had long been notorious for its sluggish work, a reputation that only worsened with Zhenya's appointment as ambassador. However, Zhenya couldn't have cared less. The truth was, throughout his entire life, public opinion and reception had never been a concern of his.

That's why he found it difficult to understand Kwon Taekjoo's perspective. So what if he neglected some governmental duties and matters of national interest?

"..."

Zhenya flipped through a few more documents, signing them with a bored expression. Suddenly, he pulled out his phone. Once unlocked with his fingerprint, he opened a secret app. A map appeared on the screen. Kwon Taekjoo had explicitly asked him not to follow him, but he hadn't said anything about spying, so there wasn't technically a problem. Without a second thought, Zhenya tapped the location icon. A message popped up: "Tracking target."

Kwon Taekjoo always wondered how Zhenya managed to pinpoint his location, suspecting that he was being monitored. He wasn't entirely wrong, but it was too complicated to track him using phone taps when he was constantly on the move. If Zhenya wanted to catch him, he needed a more detailed and immediate source of information.

As a result, Zhenya had implanted a subcutaneous microchip into Kwon Taekjoo's skin while tending to his injuries, after Taekjoo had been wounded and lost consciousness. The chip was tiny and blended in with the normal tissue, remaining undetectable in most physical inspections. It tracked Taekjoo's location in real time and transmitted the data to Zhenya's phone.

The search was quickly completed, and Kwon Taekjoo's location appeared on the screen. Zhenya glanced at the name of the place and raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"... Vladivostok?"

Who would have guessed Kwon Taekjoo had gone to Russia? While it was always difficult to pinpoint the exact nature of his missions, this was completely unexpected. It was the first time Taekjoo had traveled to Russia on an official mission since they had started dating.

Zhenya leaned back in his chair, lost in thought. What had caused South Korea and Russia to cross paths? Given the circumstances, it was highly likely that North Korea was involved. What's more, Kwon Taekjoo's last visit to Russia had been to verify information about North Korea's involvement in the development of "Anastasia."

Was there a new issue prompting cooperation between Russia and North Korea? For now, Zhenya had no information on the matter and couldn't form any concrete theories.

"Umm..."

He rifled through his thoughts. Before heading out on his mission, Kwon Taekjoo had been unusually gentle and affectionate, accepting everything Zhenya did with remarkable grace. At the time, Zhenya had chalked it up to Taekjoo being indulgent because he had to leave for work so close to Zhenya's birthday.

But maybe that wasn't it.

"Do you want something from me?"

"Besides wanting you to stay put? Not really."

"All your efforts to keep me at bay only make me more curious. What are you up to now?"

It had been the same back then.

“Don’t twist my words. What I’m saying is that you shouldn’t put yourself in danger because of me.”

“Put myself in danger? Me?”

And then, again.

Kwon Taekjoo wasn’t simply expressing frustration at Zhenya’s constant interference in his missions, as usual. While concerned for Zhenya’s safety, it seemed there was more to it. Zhenya had found it odd that Taekjoo had suddenly brought up family relations. Was Taekjoo planning to stir up conflict in Russia? He must have been agonizing over it, unable to confront his partner directly about his potential involvement.

Curiously, despite Zhenya’s many reassurances that he wouldn’t interfere, Taekjoo had resorted to using a sedative on him, worried that Zhenya might go back on his word. It seemed Taekjoo was determined to keep him away from the current situation. Was he that afraid of becoming his enemy again?

“Oh, Taekjoo. You really do treasure me, don’t you?” Zhenya sighed, a soft chuckle escaping his lips.

Taekjoo was behaving so adorably. A strange sense of happiness washed over Zhenya as he thought about how Taekjoo was concerned about the possibility of them clashing during the mission. Here was a man who prioritized his job over his own mother, yet now he was torn between his work and Zhenya. Zhenya’s lips curled into a satisfied smile.

Shortly after, someone knocked on the door. Zhenya’s expression instantly changed from one of sweet satisfaction to a tense, stern look. His gaze turned cold as he fixed his eyes on the closed door.

When there was no immediate response, a voice from outside asked, *“Sir?”* It seemed Pavel Menshikov had come to speak with him.

“If you’re busy, I can come back later.”

Pavel’s tone was cautious, full of anxiety and hesitation. It was clear he was worried about angering Zhenya.

“Come in.”

“Thank you! Excuse me.”

Pavel Menshikov paused politely for a moment before opening the door. He entered, carrying another large pile of documents in his arms.

“We would greatly appreciate it if you could take a look at these, given your timely visit.”

Pavel had likely gathered all the documents that needed Zhenya's approval, unsure of when he might be available again. But as soon as he saw Zhenya's intense gaze, his optimism faded. Zhenya's icy blue eyes bore into him with a piercing intensity, as though trying to drill a hole through his skull. Pavel's entire body trembled, as though someone were pointing a gun at him. He didn't dare take another step forward.

"Did I... disturb you by any chance?"

Pavel Menshikov barely managed to speak when, suddenly, Zhenya curled his long, pale finger, motioning for him to come closer. Startled, Pavel swallowed nervously and, reluctantly, lifted his feet from where they were glued to the floor. Thoughts raced through his mind, including the premature deaths of those who had crossed paths with Zhenya in the past. The intense and silent gaze felt like a sharp nail being driven into his head.

"You're being painfully slow."

"I'm sorry!"

Pavel hurried to stand in front of Zhenya's desk. Zhenya regarded him with a disapproving look before speaking. The movement seemed to happen in a second, but Pavel felt it as if it were unfolding in agonizing slow motion, each second stretching out unbearably.

"What's the current situation in Russia?"

"...Excuse me?"

Pavel's expression turned to one of confusion, as if he had just heard something absurd. One would expect that as a diplomat representing a country, an ambassador like Zhenya would be well-informed about the affairs of both his own nation and the one he was in. But the question seemed utterly strange coming from Zhenya, who wouldn't bat an eye if Russia disappeared off the face of the earth.

He clearly hadn't misheard, because Zhenya added, "The last time I was there, I had personal matters to attend to, so I couldn't catch up on the entire situation. But, thinking back, the Kremlin seemed unusually busy. They're up to something, aren't they?"

"I... I don't know, I..."

"You don't know?" Zhenya interrupted, tilting his head.

His pale eyes sharpened, as if they were coated in ice. Pavel bit his lip and held his breath. He fought to suppress the trembling that welled up from within, tensing his muscles. Zhenya could snap his neck with a single motion, and if he did, the Kremlin would likely pretend nothing happened, just as they always had.

The Kremlin's blatant disregard for Zhenya's actions—and their indifference to them—was yet another factor reaffirming Psikh Bogdanov's power.

"I'll ask you once more. Do you really know nothing?"

Zhenya's question forced Pavel to choose: between honesty or certain death. Pavel shifted nervously, gazing anxiously into Zhenya's piercing blue eyes. He wasn't sure if the information he had was what Zhenya was looking for.

"I'm not entirely sure since I haven't been to Russia in a while, but it seems there was significant restructuring in Vladivostok last month."

"Vladivostok?"

A look of amusement spread across Zhenya's face. Pavel quickly nodded in confirmation.

"Yes. From what I've heard, North Korea is sending researchers to Pharmzaschita as part of an expedition. We've had many technological collaborations with North Korea in the past, so I thought it was just for another project."

"Really... restructuring the whole city just to accommodate a few researchers?"

"Well, a high-ranking North Korean official is accompanying them as well."

"What? Are they trying to hold another summit?"

"I don't think so. If it were national leaders visiting, we would have received a briefing. Also, the embassies and intelligence agencies wouldn't be this quiet."

"That makes it even stranger. Suddenly, we have visitors sightseeing in Pharmzaschita, and they're treating such a minor event with national-level security."

"North Korea is a very secretive nation, so they may be uncomfortable drawing international attention. Russia could simply be setting up protocols to prevent that."

"Even so, the Kremlin wouldn't go into high alert just to host a foreign delegation. Maybe we don't know exactly what's going on, but I'd bet that North Korean official came bearing quite an impressive gift, don't you think?"

"I can't say for sure. I don't know all the details..."

"Vladivostok, huh?" Zhenya murmured to himself, lost in thought. His previously emotionless face now displayed a faint, amused smile.

"All right, you can go."

"Of course, sir."

Pavel dropped off the documents he'd brought and hurried out of the office, nearly stumbling as his leg buckled under him on his way out.

A loud commotion erupted on the other side of the door. The other staff members seemed anxious to check if Pavel was okay.

Zhenya paid no attention to them, silently piecing the situation together. His long fingers drummed lightly on the desk.

It was now clear why Kwon Taekjoo had gone to Vladivostok and why he had made every effort to keep Zhenya out of it. Russia and North Korea were clearly up to something, and it was likely that both the Kremlin and the Bogdanov family were heavily involved in this event.

"What are you hiding from me, Taekjoo?"

"I'm not hiding anything."

"No, something must've happened to you, right?"

"I told you, nothing happened. I've been thinking this for a while now, but I never said it out loud. I've been too comfortable for too long, but now I feel like I'm regaining my senses."

"Ha... Taekjoo. Do you really think I wouldn't notice if you were hiding someth-...?"

"Don't start making excuses to come find me. Don't try to figure out what I'm doing when I'm not around. That's how it's supposed to be."

Kwon Taekjoo had always shown concern over Zhenya's relationship with his family. No matter how many times Zhenya insisted they were insignificant to him, it made no difference. Because of his job, Kwon Taekjoo was forced to prioritize South Korea's national interests above all else, which often put Zhenya at odds with his own family. Zhenya, for his part, didn't think it was a big deal.

"All I need from you is to be a loving partner, you bastard."

That grumpy remark from Kwon Taekjoo may have reflected his true feelings. He wanted Zhenya by his side, not as an enemy, not even as an ally committed to danger... just as his partner.

"Taekjoo..."

Zhenya chuckled softly and leaned back in his chair, his quiet laughter mixing with his breath. The chair rocked back and forth for a long while.

Vladivostok Airport grounds.

A tug hauling a rolling platform was heading towards the warehouse. The driver, undoubtedly Russian, steered with one hand and nodded at a colleague passing by. Even though he was blasting upbeat dance music through his headphones, his face remained completely bored.

After parking at the warehouse, the man stepped out of the tug and looked around the calm airport grounds. It was well into the night, and the runway was dark, occupied by only a few

planes, all with their lights off. The cargo plane that had just landed was the last flight of the day—at least according to the official records.

The man looked up at the night sky. His blue eyes, partially hidden beneath drooping lashes, gleamed with understanding. However, his lazy posture, leaning on one leg, and slow movements were typical of his usual demeanor.

He turned his head upon hearing someone approach from behind. It was his coworker, who had been working alongside him until the end of their shift, waving goodbye.

"I'm heading home first. Good luck with the rest of the work, Igor."

"Yeah, see you tomorrow," he replied in his usual disinterested tone.

Once his colleague had left, an impenetrable silence enveloped the warehouse, amplifying the music from his headphones. Despite the lively melody, which would have anyone else bopping along, his eyes remained dull with boredom.

How much time had passed?

Suddenly, the music began to fade. The man tapped his headphones indifferently. The static soon disappeared, replaced by a voice.

["Hunting."]

"Two tigers. Radio check," he responded without hesitation.

The voice was no longer that of Igor, the ramp manager, but rather Kwon Taekjoo's—clear and strong, without a hint of the previous gruffness. After confirming the radio code, his counterpart responded, **"Copy,"** and began relaying the situation.

["This is Foxtrot. Special train Pyongyang 677 just arrived at Khasan Station."]

Kwon Taekjoo had been informed earlier that the train had passed through Najin. Its arrival at Khasan meant it was traveling at normal speeds along regular routes. The train was scheduled to remain at Khasan Station for about half a day. Since Khasan was in Russia, where the rail gauge was different from North Korea's, adjustments had to be made. This meant all cargo would be unloaded, the wheels would be changed, and the upper part of the train car would be lifted to swap out the train cars. It was the perfect opportunity to investigate and identify the cargo.

"What about our target?"

["No sign of the target. The only confirmed passengers are armed soldiers. We can't determine what they're carrying, but the security is extremely tight. They're currently swapping bogies without additional inspections."]

All passengers must disembark during a bogie swap for safety reasons. In previous instances, when a North Korean leader traveled to Vladivostok by land, they would disembark at Khasan Station and stay overnight in a nearby town during the bogie swap. However, no such

preparations were made this time, suggesting that Park Jeong-ho and the other targets were not aboard the train. It made sense that such extreme measures would only be taken for someone as important as a North Korean leader.

But what was even stranger was that if the 677 was just a regular cargo train, there would be no need for armed soldiers to escort it. And what's more, there should have been at least a minimal inspection of the cargo after crossing international borders. The lack of such procedures indicated that North Korea and Russia had already made prior arrangements for the transport. To Kwon Taekjoo, the whole situation felt suspicious.

"Anything else out of the ordinary?"

["It's hard to say because it's dark, but all the soldiers who got off the train were wearing masks."]

"Masks? Are you sure?"

["Mhm… correction, I see hoses attached to the masks. It looks like a gas mask."]

"A gas mask? And what about their uniforms?"

["They're dressed in black from head to toe, but... it's hard to tell if it's standard military gear or protective suits."]

"Got it. Keep watching them and report immediately if anything unusual happens. And remember to check in at the next scheduled transmission."

["I didn't have anything to report."]

"If there's nothing, report that too. It keeps both of us updated on what's going on."

["You sound like my boss."]

"Do you think I enjoy this? If you want to argue about ranks, go join the military. Let me warn you, do your job properly, even if you don't want to. Don't take matters into your own hands. If you get exposed to the enemy, it's not just your neck on the line."

The radio cut off abruptly before Kwon Taekjoo finished speaking. His headphones resumed playing the same music as before, as if nothing had happened. His frustration grew, fueled by his partner’s blatant disregard for basic radio protocol.

"Ah, what a pain…"

Kwon Taekjoo muttered a curse under his breath, staring up at the sky. The American agent, "Foxtrot," had been uncooperative from the start. He seemed to have many complaints about South Korea taking the lead on the operation while they acted as backup. Every time they made contact, Foxtrot would give him a hard time, and this time was no different.

Kwon Taekjoo took a deep breath, trying to calm his rising frustration. Maybe it was a blessing they hadn't met in person. If they had, he wouldn't have been able to stop thinking

about that exasperating face and might have caused quite a scene.

Foxtrot had mentioned that the guards were equipped with gas masks and protective gear. Although he wasn't sure, it was worth considering.

What on earth were they transporting on that train?

If it were some highly flammable or explosive chemical compound, there would be no reason to swap the bogies so recklessly, as it could trigger an accident during the lifting process. It would be much safer to transfer the cargo to another train first.

The fact that they didn't take that precaution pointed to two possibilities: either the cargo wasn't impact-sensitive, or lifting the train car was safer than handling the load manually.

In other words, the item in question wasn't sensitive to impact, but it could still pose a danger to humans. This would explain why it was transported separately from the North Korean delegation, who traveled by plane. The fact that soldiers were guarding the cargo, fully equipped with gas masks and protective suits, was strong evidence supporting this theory. The level of caution was far too excessive for a simple technology exchange or research collaboration.

Park Jeong-ho, the microbiologist who had studied the ecosystem of Mount Baekdu. The state-run Russian pharmaceutical company Pharmzaschita and the defense contractor Rostak had both invited him for unclear reasons. The special Pyongyang train passing through at the same time. And Russia's discreet hospitality. All these suspicious elements pointed to one conclusion.

The creation of a new biological weapon.

Of course, this could all be a product of his imagination, as it was still a premature conclusion. Nevertheless, everything suggested that whatever North Korea and Russia were plotting was far more sinister than they had anticipated.

As Kwon Taekjoo was deep in thought, a blinding light suddenly shone on him from behind. Squinting, he turned to see two airport police officers entering the warehouse. Upon seeing him, they approached with suspicious expressions, their rifles raised and aimed at him.

"Hey, you."

"Yes, sir."

"Turn around slowly and face us."

Kwon Taekjoo turned obediently towards the police and raised his hands in a show of compliance. However, the officers did not lower their weapons, maintaining their aim at him. They exchanged glances before one of them stepped forward to inspect the ID hanging from Kwon Taekjoo’s neck. He examined the photo of Igor, comparing it to Kwon Taekjoo’s face, then used a card scanner to verify its validity as if a visual check wasn't enough. There was

no need for such rigorous inspection, especially since all official landings had been completed—unless something confidential was about to go down at the airport.

"Igor Mussorgsky, what are you doing here? Didn't you hear you were supposed to be out of here before midnight?"

Pushing him to leave before midnight at an international airport where hundreds of planes landed and took off daily was, simply put, impossible. But this was Russia, where the impossible happened every day.

Kwon Taekjoo apologized earnestly, skillfully maneuvering out of the situation.

"Ah… I'm terribly sorry. I didn't realize how late it had gotten. I got distracted—family matters on my mind."

"Well, you should know better than to let family matters interfere with work. Stop lingering around here and get lost."

"Ah, yes, of course."

Kwon Taekjoo gave a small bow in apology as he left the warehouse. The police followed him closely, shutting the door behind him as he headed to the parking lot. Their vigilance didn't waver until he started his personal vehicle. He noticed them watching his license plate. It was standard protocol to prevent espionage or infiltration, but to Kwon Taekjoo, it was a clear sign something suspicious was going on.

Kwon Taekjoo drove off, waving goodbye to the officers.

"Best of luck, gentlemen."

Suddenly, there was a loud thump from the trunk. Apparently, the real Igor had woken up from his drug-induced sleep. Kwon Taekjoo tensed, glancing at the police to see if they had noticed. But when their eyes met, they merely grunted in annoyance, demanding to know why he was still there.

Kwon Taekjoo gave them a final, quick nod and exited the airport grounds. Circling the terminal was out of the question, as police vehicles and sedans were gathered all around the area. Barricades were set up everywhere, blocking the entrance. The scene was far from ordinary.

Soon, Kwon Taekjoo's car came to a stop in a secluded area some distance from the airport. The lush vegetation meant that people rarely frequented the place, but it was even quieter than usual due to the late hour. He stepped out of the driver's seat and walked toward the back of the vehicle as a loud commotion came from the trunk.

As soon as he opened it, Igor jerked up, straining against the tight restraints that bound him. His face was already drenched in sweat and tears. The duct tape over his mouth was half peeled off, as if he had been desperately gnawing at it.

"Ahhh!"

Igor screamed when he saw Kwon Taekjoo, who looked exactly like him. Kwon Taekjoo clicked his tongue and quickly covered Igor's mouth with his hand.

"Shhh. You woke up too soon. Why not try sleeping a little longer?"

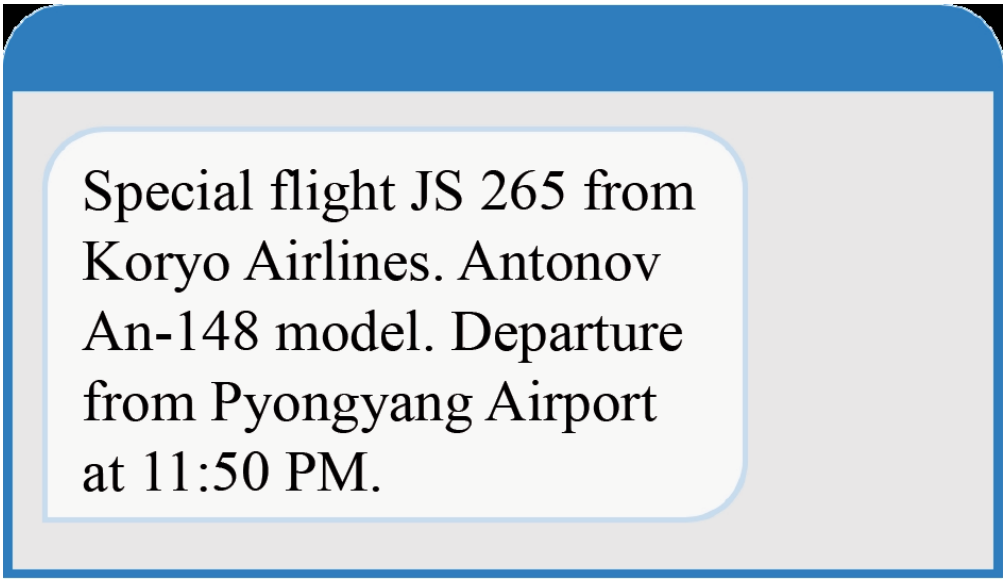
"Ahh! P-Please, spare me!"

"Yeah, yeah. I'll spare your life. Be careful, this is going to sting."

Without hesitation, Kwon Taekjoo jabbed a tranquilizer into Igor's neck. Igor kept screaming at the top of his lungs, struggling against his restraints, but slowly began to lose strength. Though unwillingly, he fell into a deep sleep, exhausted by his own efforts. By the time he woke up, he would be back where he started, as if the whole ordeal had been nothing more than a terrible nightmare.

Kwon Taekjoo tossed a water bottle into the trunk and shut it. Then he returned to the driver's seat and gazed at the dark night sky. No lights seemed to be visible yet.

He pulled out his work phone and unlocked it, revealing a message from his support team. After inputting a specific password, he was granted access and checked the message's contents.



Kwon Taekjoo scanned the area around the airport with binoculars, but nothing appeared out of the ordinary. The airport had dimmed all its bright lights, and a deep silence had settled over the area, as if all official business had concluded for the night.

A direct flight from Pyongyang to Vladivostok would take just over an hour without needing to pass through China. It was almost time for its arrival. Kwon Taekjoo rested his chin on the steering wheel and waited. A little while later, another message arrived on his phone.

This wasn't a publicly known tower frequency. They were apparently using a confidential channel to avoid detection or the risk of terrorism. Kwon Taekjoo turned on his specialized radio and tuned it to the corresponding frequency. As he put on his headphones, he heard the usual radio static, quickly followed by a conversation between Vladivostok's control tower and the Koryo Airlines pilots.

["Tower, Koryo Airlines 265, inbound to Vladivostok. Good evening."]

["Koryo Airlines 265, turn left heading 340 and join the localizer for runway 7L. Good evening, sir."]

["Turning left heading 340, joining the localizer for runway 7L. Koryo Airlines 265."]

Kwon Taekjoo directed his binoculars in the direction they had mentioned. Through the clouds, he could faintly make out the aircraft's blinking lights.

["Koryo Airlines 265, reduce speed to 210 knots and descend, maintain 4,000 feet. Cleared for ILS approach to runway 7."]

["Reducing speed to 210 knots, descending and maintaining 4,000 feet. Koryo Airlines 265."]

["Koryo Airlines 265, reduce speed to 180 knots."]

["Koryo Airlines 265, reducing speed to 180 knots. Approaching runway 7 via ILS."]

["Koryo Airlines 265, cleared to land on runway 7. Winds 360 at 5 knots."]

["Runway 7, cleared to land. Koryo Airlines 265."]

Koryo Airlines 265 finally came into view. Kwon Taekjoo set his phone aside and held it with both hands. Next, he activated a drone he had secretly hidden in the airport storage area, assuming remote control of it. The drone, capable of reaching speeds of up to 300 kilometers per hour, was equipped with a specialized lens on its underside, allowing it to capture sharp

images of moving objects even at high speeds. The drone was already quite small, and with the darkness of night, it was even harder to detect.

Kwon Taekjoo maneuvered the drone toward Koryo Airlines 265 as it taxied down the runway after landing. By the time the plane came to a complete stop, ground vehicles quickly lined up on both sides. Moments later, a stairway extended from the aircraft, and the doors began to open.

Kwon Taekjoo flew the drone toward the plane's wings and began recording the faces of everyone disembarking. As indicated in the confidential reports he had received from the NIS, the Director of Operations of North Korea's General Staff Department, Sim Young-il, his secretary Kim Gil-ha, and the key figure for the upcoming North Korea-Russia conference, microbiologist Park Jeong-ho, each stepped into the official state vehicle. The three of them, along with the rest of the delegation, began traveling down a restricted route without undergoing any additional inspections.

"Good."

Once Kwon Taekjoo confirmed the identities of those involved, he retrieved the drone and then opened the car's trunk. He pulled Igor out, placed him in the driver's seat, and undid his restraints. After pouring vodka from a bottle inside the car, he tossed the empty bottle into the back seat. Any passerby would assume Igor was just a drunk who had fallen asleep at the wheel. If Igor tried to report anything, Russian police would likely dismiss it as the ramblings of a drunk.

After gathering everything up, Kwon Taekjoo made his way to the back of the grounds, cutting through dense bushes until he reached the motorcycle he had hidden earlier. He got on.

"Time to get moving."

After starting the engine, he sped down the hill, in pursuit of the North Korean delegation.

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Chapter End Notes

Support the author by purchasing the novel on Ridibooks.

Hunting Two Tigers

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•SPANISH DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Zhenya leaned back in his office chair, staring at the ceiling. He had finished all the work he had been putting off out of sheer boredom and now found himself with nothing else to do. Normally, he would be chasing after Kwon Taekjoo, but now that he had to focus on work for the first time, it felt tedious and frustrating, almost like a prison. Not even Kwon Taekjoo's mother was answering his calls, leaving him with no way to pass the time. Zhenya admitted that patience wasn't exactly his strongest virtue.

"Mmm..."

Wasn't there anything he could do to kill time? Zhenya thought for a moment, pulled out his phone, and opened the secret espionage app. This time, he wouldn't be tracking Kwon Taekjoo but his second brother. Whenever he had free time, he liked to keep tabs on his family... especially Bazim, as his activities were often tied to the Kremlin's plans.

After a moment, a marker appeared on the map, showing Bazim's current location. Zhenya's eyes narrowed as he processed the information.

"So, he's in Vladivostok too. Interesting."

Bazim, the president's right-hand man, had left Moscow to visit Vladivostok. What could he possibly be doing there? Bazim rarely left the capital, fully aware of the risks involved. Leaving his post vacant meant he could easily be replaced in the world of politics.

The fact that a bureaucrat like Bazim, known for his cautious and distrustful nature, had suddenly traveled to a border region like Vladivostok suggested that something important was about to happen. It was possible he was there to personally greet the North Korean

delegation on behalf of the president. If that were the case, it was clear that the Kremlin was very interested in whatever gift the North Koreans were bringing.

“And what are they after this time?”

Zhenya pondered the question for a moment before hacking into Bazim’s official networks, including his private email, a secondary account used exclusively for government matters, all communications from his five phones, and even the documents from a secret folder on his personal computer. Though everything was encrypted, decoding it was fairly simple—at least for him.

Among the files that appeared on his monitor were highly confidential Russian government documents. Zhenya quickly decrypted the double encryption keys for each file. With his deep knowledge of the Russian security system and the advantage of having borrowed Bazim’s access credentials, it was remarkably easy to break through.

Zhenya conducted a search for "Vladivostok" among the hundreds of confidential documents. After filtering the most recent results, he began skimming through them one by one.

[In 2016, the thawing of permafrost revealed reindeer carcasses. A child who came into contact with them died of anthrax, and seven adults were infected. It was the first anthrax outbreak in the region since 1941.]

[In 2019, the remains of an ancient wolf that died 27,000 years ago were discovered in the Siberian permafrost. A highly infectious virus was confirmed in the wolf’s intestines.]

[In 2022, a donkey carcass was found in the permafrost of Yakutia, supposedly buried under a lake 48,000 years ago. Thirteen new viruses were identified in the remains.]

Permafrost?

Permafrost refers to a layer of frozen ground that stays well below freezing temperatures, typically located in polar or mountainous regions. Its depth ranges from a few centimeters to hundreds of meters, and it is common in frigid areas such as the polar regions, Siberia, Greenland, Alaska, and northern Canada.

Recently, permafrost regions had garnered significant attention due to global warming. Atmospheric changes were causing the permafrost layers to thin, exposing buried flora and fauna. This posed a serious problem, as these remains often harbored deadly bacteria or viruses. If humanity didn’t deal with these viruses, a pandemic could break out.

However, this had long been a concern raised by environmentalists and meteorologists. Why was this public information included in confidential documents? Zhenya found the answer in the next sentence he read.

[A new microorganism was recently collected from the crater of Mount Baekdu in North Korea. It is classified as a strict aerobe and causes acute sepsis if inhaled. It has developed effective defense mechanisms against the human immune system, and current antibiotics and

vaccines are largely ineffective. Within 24 hours of infection, it causes headaches, fever, vomiting, confusion, hallucinations, and difficulty breathing, with a mortality rate of 98%.]

So, a deadly microorganism had been discovered on Mount Baekdu, listed alongside the viruses found in permafrost regions. As Zhenya pieced the information together, one conclusion became clear.

A biological weapon.

Was the Kremlin really trying to develop one in this day and age? Zhenya let out an incredulous laugh, but it quickly faded. Nothing was impossible considering the Kremlin's greed and ambition. It hadn't been long since an RNA virus spread across the planet, its unprecedented spread and lethality throwing the world into chaos. It disrupted politics, economies, societies, and cultures worldwide. At the same time, immense wealth and power had accumulated in the hands of certain factions. Given the upheaval and control a single virus had caused, it was no surprise that the Kremlin was now interested in this new microorganism.

A pathogenic microbe originating from Mount Baekdu in North Korea... It thrived in oxygen-rich environments, making it difficult to contain and rendering current antibiotics ineffective in the event of an outbreak.

And now, Russia and North Korea were keeping this information under tight wraps. The situation was becoming increasingly suspicious. Humanity wouldn't learn of this microorganism's existence until it was weaponized and posed a grave threat to their once peaceful lives. By then, it would be too late.

"Getting more childish, aren't you? You want to be a czar, but are you willing to throw away your nation's dignity for it?"

Speechless, Zhenya began searching through the rest of Bazim's personal phone records. They were filled with messages notifying someone that he had arrived in Vladivostok, was heading to meet the North Korean delegation, had contacted air traffic control, and more. The recipient was undoubtedly the Kremlin.

"How long will you keep kissing that old pig's ass?"

Shaking his head, Zhenya put on a pair of headphones and tuned into Bazim's calls. Given the frequency of Bazim's communications with the Kremlin, it was only a matter of time before he made a call to the president.

As expected, a call notification soon appeared on his hacking screen. Zhenya held his breath silently as he waited for the connection to be established. A moment later, Bazim's voice came through the headphones.

["Hello, sir. The North Korean delegation just arrived at the airport."]

["What about the cargo?"]

["It will arrive tomorrow morning."]

["They're handling it carefully, right?"]

["Of course, sir."]

["Before negotiations begin, make sure to verify the contents of the cargo."]

["Yes, sir."]

The call ended quickly. They hadn't mentioned the nature or purpose of the object, likely to avoid potential eavesdropping. But piecing together the various details and information from the confidential documents, Zhenya easily concluded that the Kremlin was plotting something once again.

The Kremlin must have learned about the newly discovered microorganism in North Korea. They were also aware of its potentially lethal effects on the human body. Most likely, they had proposed a joint project to research the microorganism and develop a cure, justifying their involvement by citing North Korea's inadequate containment facilities.

The only uncertainty was whether the Kremlin intended to use the microorganism solely to develop a cure and whether they would make the research results public. Zhenya was entirely convinced they wouldn't. The president's order to Bazim to "verify the contents of the cargo" before the conference suggested that their intentions were far from ethical. Most likely, those words referred to Bazim beginning human experimentation to verify the microorganism's lethality, as North Korea had claimed.

Did Kwon Taekjoo know what was going on? Was he aware of the material being exchanged between the two nations and how dangerous it could be?

Zhenya reopened his hacking program and adjusted his target to check where Kwon Taekjoo was, what he was doing, and what orders he had been given. However, all of Kwon Taekjoo's phone lines, both personal and work-related, were disconnected. It seemed Kwon Taekjoo was determined to keep Zhenya away this time. For now, Zhenya could only track his location through the microchip he had secretly implanted.

Zhenya drummed his fingers on the desk, torn between the burning urge to go after Kwon Taekjoo and his sense of rationality, which tried to keep him grounded. He watched the red dot blinking on the GPS tracker. It had been moving around Vladivostok Airport but suddenly shifted toward the city center, heading toward the Bogdanov Hotel. Unless there had been significant changes in the plan, it was likely that the North Korean delegation, under Bazim's direction, was staying there.

"...Taekjoo," Zhenya muttered under his breath. He stood up abruptly and quickly left the room.

Kwon Taekjoo spent the entire night watching the Bogdanov family hotel without closing his eyes for even a moment. The North Korean delegation, including Park Jeong-ho, had entered

the hotel around 2 a.m., but since then, no relevant activity had been observed. Russian police patrolled the area in shifts, but none ventured inside. In fact, no one had entered or left the hotel since the delegation's arrival. The internal surveillance was undoubtedly far more rigorous than the external security.

The mission's objective was to uncover the topics North Korea and Russia would discuss at their conference. Securing the object that North Korea had transported would be a bonus, but that was a concern to be dealt with later. Overstepping could jeopardize the entire mission. Moreover, Kwon Taekjoo wasn't working alone, so he chose not to risk a dangerous infiltration into the hotel.

The operation had begun with the American agent "Foxtrot" tracking Pyongyang's special train at Khasan station and the Japanese agent "Sierra" monitoring activity on Russky Island. Meanwhile, Kwon Taekjoo kept watch over the North Korean delegation from afar, hidden in a vantage point that allowed him to observe the Bogdanov hotel through gaps between the tall buildings in front of him.

For now, infiltrating the hotel was out of the question. Since he hadn't managed to set up any cameras or listening devices in advance, he deployed tiny cameras, the size of insects, through the narrow gaps in the ventilation grates and drain pipes. These cameras were designed to look like cockroaches, making them discreet enough to avoid attention.

After connecting his two laptops to the cameras, Kwon Taekjoo sent one to the room of Sim Young-il, the North Korean General Staff Department's operations chief, and the other to that of the biologist Park Jeong-ho. The radio waves needed to control the cameras had to pass through multiple walls, which made precise maneuvers difficult. With no better options, Kwon Taekjoo hid the cameras in lonely corners and resolved to gather as much information as he could.

After a full day of observation, Kwon Taekjoo noticed something strange. Many people came and went from Sim Young-il's room, freely using their personal devices, but in contrast, Park Jeong-ho stayed in his room all day, sitting idly. Except for brief trips to eat or use the bathroom, he remained in the same spot, with no visitors. Guards entered periodically to check on him, inspecting his room before leaving. Each time, Park Jeong-ho withdrew into a corner, silently watching as they searched his bed and belongings. Kwon Taekjoo couldn't tell if Park Jeong-ho was being protected or strictly monitored. It would have been believable if someone had told him that Park Jeong-ho was confined in a prison.

"...Seriously, what the hell?"

Wasn't Park Jeong-ho supposed to be a key figure in the upcoming conference? Why did it seem like he had been dragged there against his will? Several things didn't add up.

Suddenly, the alarm that Kwon Taekjoo had set earlier went off. He glanced at his wristwatch. It was time for the other agents to report in. But his communicator remained ominously silent.

None of the agents had reported on time so far, and when they did, their reports were vague at best. It seemed like they were looking for a way to cover themselves in case anything went

wrong in the future. It was also possible that they were taking their time to report to their own organizations first. This was exactly why Kwon Taekjoo preferred working alone.

With a sigh, Kwon Taekjoo put on his earpiece, attempting to make contact himself. Suddenly, the communicator buzzed to life.

["Hunting."]

"Two tigers."

["Foxtrot here. Pyongyang's special train 677 arrived in Vladivostok. Only a few passengers have disembarked, and the train has entered a maintenance depot without unloading anything."]

"Hmm. So, all the cargo must have been moved to storage in the depot. What's the security like?"

["Tango 4. They're only guarding the car right behind the locomotive. Four armed guards."]

"Understood. Keep monitoring until further notice."

["What? You want me to just sit here and watch? This is the perfect chance to check what's inside. The train's stationary, and there are fewer guards around. We should take advantage of the relaxed security and..."]

"Are you sure they even have any cargo? Do you even know what it is?"

["That's why I'm saying we should investigate further."]

"Listen, Foxtrot. The primary objective of this mission is to uncover the conspiracy between North Korea and Russia and find out what they're trading, not to steal the object. Don't jeopardize the mission with reckless actions."

["Agh... You're as slow as they said you'd be. I don't know if Asians are just overly cautious or too timid,"] Foxtrot muttered sourly, clearly irritated.

It was an obviously racist remark, but Kwon Taekjoo chose not to argue. He understood Foxtrot's frustration... after all, Foxtrot had been tracking the object secretly transported from North Korea to Russia, so it was understandable that he wanted to know what it was. Even Kwon Taekjoo would have been eager in his position.

But they had to be extremely meticulous at a time like this, with so many things entangled in a complex web. Acting impulsively now, with so many uncertainties, could ruin the operation and make them bear all the blame.

Kwon Taekjoo restrained his growing indignation and sternly warned Foxtrot.

"'Think before you act.' Last I checked, that advice isn't exclusive to Asians. It's much safer to be overly cautious than to act recklessly out of impatience. Don't risk

everything for a chance that may or may not pan out. I'm warning you, don't go off on your own."

[Pff. Got it.]

Foxtrot ended the conversation with clear irritation.

"Agh, what a nightmare."

Kwon Taekjoo ripped the earpiece from his ear and leaned back. The anger he had been holding back surged up in an instant.

This was exactly why he hated relying on others or working with partners during missions. It was impossible to control all the agents, and the slightest mistake could bring the entire operation crashing down like a domino effect. It might have been a bit better if he had prior experience working with Foxtrot or Sierra, but they were complete strangers from foreign countries, meaning disagreements were inevitable. So much for "cooperating." This whole operation felt more like an awkward three-legged race where each person was of a different height and build.

Kwon Taekjoo glared at the laptop with distaste. Moments later, a knock was heard in Sim Young-il's room. Kwon Taekjoo put on his headphones to tune in.

["Enter."]

Sim Young-il's voice soon echoed through the recording. His secretary, Kim Gilha, entered the room shortly after.

["So, how did it go?"]

["We left it at the train maintenance depot, as you ordered. The Russian railways said they would handle the transportation from there."]

["Everything will be fine, right?"]

["We warned them well in advance, so there's no way they'll cause us any trouble over it."]

["Um, I suppose so. Very well then, you may leave."]

["Yes, sir."]

Sim Young-il waited until Kim Gilha had completely exited the room before making a discreet phone call. As soon as the connection was established, he bowed his head in respect, clearly indicating who was on the other end. He glanced cautiously around the room and moved toward the window. As soon as he did, Kwon Taekjoo's headphones emitted static. It seemed Sim Young-il had installed some kind of interference device to block any eavesdropping attempts near the window and door. With his mouth covered throughout the conversation, Kwon Taekjoo found it hard to decipher what was being said.

With a slight sigh, Kwon Taekjoo removed his headphones. He had thought everything would go smoothly, but it was clear he had underestimated his opponent.

Sim Young-il's call ended without Kwon Taekjoo gaining anything useful. Looking visibly relieved, he left the room. He was undoubtedly pleased that things had gone according to his plan.

Kwon Taekjoo started feeling unnecessarily anxious. He knew the right moment would come after exercising patience, but they couldn't just sit idly by waiting for it to arrive. They had to stay vigilant to avoid missing their chance. Even so, he couldn't shake the nagging worry that he might be overlooking something crucial while silently monitoring his enemies' movements.

Just then, his communicator beeped again, startling him. Kwon Taekjoo quickly put it in his ear.

["Hunting."]

"Two tigers."

["Sierra reporting. Alpha, can you hear me?"]

It was a radio call from the Japanese agent, 'Sierra'. What had they found during their surveillance of the Far Eastern Federal University?

"I hear you loud and clear. Report the situation."

["The area's been suspicious since midnight. Several black vans and trucks arrived, and the Natural Sciences Building has been completely off-limits since the afternoon for a fire inspection. They even set up barricades, making it impossible to get close."]

"According to Foxtrot, they seem to be holding something important on the train that left Pyongyang. I believe they plan to transfer the cargo to the building tonight. Do you see any guards wearing gas masks or hazmat suits around?"

["Negative. Not a single one."]

"What about the trucks?"

["They're all cube trucks, so it's hard to tell."]

"Can't you get closer to see what's inside?"

["Wouldn't that be too risky?"]

"...Fine. Just leave it for now if you're not feeling confident. Report immediately if you see anyone with a gas mask, hazmat suit, or any kind of quarantine equipment."

["Do you have any idea what they're trying to do?"]

“I’m still not entirely sure. I’ll update you when things become clearer. If everything goes as expected, that cargo will be transferred tonight. Things will get much more intense from here on if that building is really their final destination, so stay alert and have a gas mask ready, just in case.”

[“Understood.”]

Kwon Taekjoo let out another sigh as he finished the call with Sierra. They were observing from a safe distance, which made it hard to gather much useful information. One of his teammates wanted to act recklessly on his own, while the other was behaving far too passively, which only amplified his nerves. Honestly, at this point, it would’ve been better if Kwon Taekjoo had been assigned to all three locations himself. Even lifelong partners sometimes couldn’t agree. What could you expect from a last-minute team?

Kwon Taekjoo pushed aside his frustrations and turned his attention to Park Jeong-ho on the monitor. The man had been sitting motionless for hours, but suddenly, he stood up and walked directly toward the hidden camera.

“Huh...?”

Before Kwon Taekjoo could react, Park Jeong-ho’s face filled the screen.

“There’s a cockroach here…”

He reached out, grabbing the insect-like camouflaged camera. The screen immediately went dark as his hand covered the lens.

“Ah, crap. Did he find me out?”

Park Jeong-ho examined the device, turning it over in his hands. At first glance, it looked like an innocent insect, but upon closer inspection, it would undoubtedly raise suspicions. As a biologist, it was only a matter of time before he realized what it truly was.

Kwon Taekjoo pulled at his hair and sighed in frustration. Meanwhile, Park Jeong-ho had walked into the bathroom with the camera in hand. Without hesitation, he tossed it into the toilet and flushed it. The current quickly swept the device away, disappearing from view. The final recording showed Park Jeong-ho calmly watching before the feed cut out.

“Damn it!”

Kwon Taekjoo quickly grabbed his binoculars and moved to the window, trying to spot any activity at the hotel. He activated his communicator, ready to alert Foxtrot and Sierra in case their operation had been compromised.

But, no matter how long he waited, the hotel remained eerily quiet. If Park Jeong-ho had alerted his superiors about the hidden camera, there should’ve been some noticeable reaction by now.

Strangely enough, even after a long while, there were no signs of disturbance. The area around the hotel was unnervingly silent and calm. Even the guards stood in complete

stillness, not even communicating via their radios.

“What the hell...?”

Had Park Jeong-ho not reported the camera? Why? Of all people, he would’ve known that the camera wasn’t a real cockroach.

Come to think of it, it was odd that he had flushed the camera in the first place. If he wanted to report that he was being spied on, he’d need solid evidence. Handing the camera to the guards would’ve made more sense than discreetly disposing of it.

Don’t tell me…

A hunch hit Kwon Taekjoo. He rushed back to the couch and rewound the live recording.

Park Jeong-ho, who had been sitting quietly all day, suddenly fixed his gaze directly on the camera. Kwon Taekjoo zoomed in, analyzing the footage closely. Park Jeong-ho remained still, his eyes locked on the camera, as if he knew he was being watched.

Then, he abruptly stood up and approached the camera.

“There’s a cockroach here…”

He grabbed the camera as if he were catching a bug and examined it closely. Then, just as before, he headed to the bathroom and flushed it, just as Kwon Taekjoo had observed earlier.

A strange sense of foreboding washed over Kwon Taekjoo as he rewound the recording and played it back at 0.5x speed. Once again, Park Jeong-ho focused on the camera and slowly approached. He grabbed it and carefully inspected the strange object, which could have come from anywhere.

“What is this?”

After watching closely, Kwon Taekjoo paused the recording and rewound it 10 seconds.

“There’s a cockroach here…”

The slow-motion playback of Park Jeong-ho approaching the camera was the same as before. The only difference Kwon Taekjoo noticed was that his lips moved for a few seconds longer after mentioning the cockroach. He didn’t say anything else. Kwon Taekjoo turned the volume up to maximum and brought out an audio analyzer to check. But, as expected, the recording hadn’t picked up any sound, other than Park Jeong-ho’s breathing.

Despite this, Kwon Taekjoo played the same segment over and over. Although he still couldn’t hear any other sound, Park Jeong-ho’s lip movements became clearer each time.

“I think he’s trying to say something.”

He played the recording again. Park Jeong-ho subtly moved his lips toward the camera, clearly aware that the North Korean surveillance cameras in the room might detect his

gestures. Kwon Taekjoo focused intently on his lips, trying to decipher the words he was mouthing.

“Sa...Save...”

Kwon Taekjoo kept reading Park Jeong-ho’s lips with deep concentration, as if he were trying to read his mind.

The result was:

“Save me... please?”

A completely unexpected message emerged from his reconstructed words.

Bazim was staying in Saga, a rural locality near the hotel, while maintaining a discreet and close connection with the Kremlin. The president had strictly warned him to prevent any details about the conference from leaking to the public. He wasn't concerned about his own reputation... he simply wanted to keep the newly discovered microorganism from Mount Baekdu secret until it could be carefully analyzed and its potential applications evaluated.

The microorganism transported from North Korea was to be taken to the Far Eastern Federal University laboratory for further analysis and animal experimentation. Of course, before reaching that stage, many arrangements still needed to be coordinated with North Korea. The Kremlin was eager to leverage Russia’s technological superiority in their joint efforts. If the microorganism from Mount Baekdu met expectations, they would try to claim exclusive rights, while North Korea would expect significant financial compensation in return. Therefore, it was crucial to determine if the organism was truly worthwhile.

Bazim had reviewed the content of North Korea’s report several times. In summary, the new microbe discovered in Mount Baekdu was similar to a pathogenic bacterium or virus. It posed no threat when in the wild, but if inhaled by animals, it was a different story. After testing on laboratory rats and pigs, North Korean researchers discovered that between 6 and 24 hours after exposure to the microbe, all test subjects died from severe sepsis. Of all the subjects, only one survived, but even then, it couldn’t breathe on its own.

Could it work on humans too?

That was the first question that crossed Bazim’s mind as he read the report. North Korea had not included specific details about human testing, but it was evident, given that they operated detention camps where human rights violations were widespread. Every day, dozens of bodies were removed from these camps for mass burial or incineration under the supervision of the Ministry of Security, ensuring that the causes of death remained a secret.

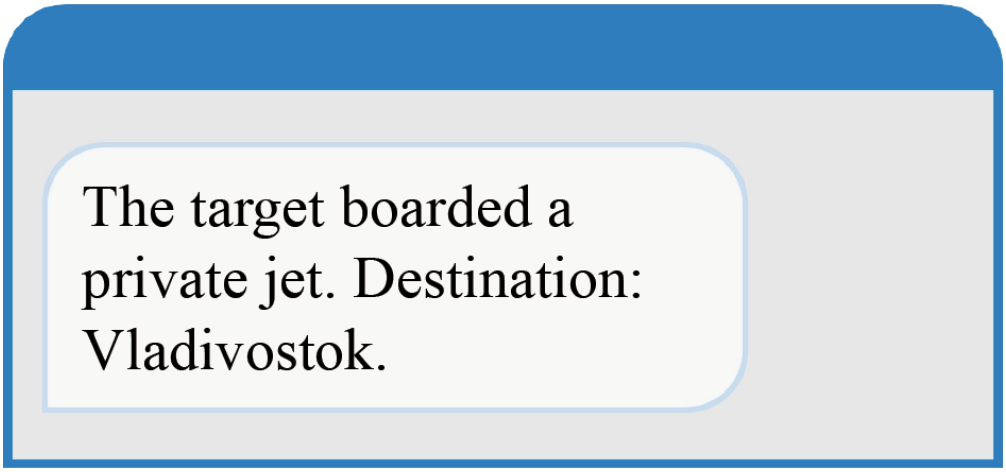
Likewise, North Korea wouldn’t have requested a collaboration if they weren’t somewhat certain about the potential uses of the microorganism from Mount Baekdu. It was logical to assume they had already tested it on humans, and it had proven lethal, unless, of course, they were trying to deceive Russia.

Naturally, not even an ally could take North Korea's statements at face value based solely on a document. Since a significant amount of money was at stake in this exchange, Russia needed to verify the quality of the product. That was why they had transported the latest samples to Vladivostok, despite the risks posed by public opinion.

Bazim began skimming through the North Korean report to minimize any potential errors during testing when, suddenly, his phone rang. It was a message from an intelligence agent who had infiltrated South Korea. Disguised as a diplomat, the agent had been assigned to the Russian embassy to keep an eye on Zhenya, known for his unpredictable nature.

"What? At this hour?"

A wave of unease swept over Bazim. Reports about Zhenya usually arrived once a day at a set time. Receiving a notification so late meant that Zhenya had done something unexpected. For instance, not long ago, he had visited Ajinoki Island to tamper with the weapon he had developed. Bazim quickly checked the message.



Bazim frowned. He reread the message in disbelief, but the content remained unchanged.

"Yevgeny is coming here?"

Zhenya had no direct connections to Vladivostok. Even if he came for matters related to his arms business, it didn't make sense. Zhenya rarely handled administrative affairs in person. Most of his business was conducted through professional intermediaries. What could be drawing his interest to Vladivostok now?

As his mind filled with questions, one thought surfaced.

"Is it because of that Korean spy again?"

That single suspicion was enough to answer all the questions. There were only two reasons why Zhenya would leave South Korea... either he was visiting Ajinoki Island for personal matters, or he was tracking Kwon Taekjoo on another overseas mission.

Most of Kwon Taekjoo's work, or rather, the South Korean government's, was detrimental to Russia and its allies. Zhenya repeatedly got involved in these missions, putting the Bogdanov

family in a dangerous position. As his brother and a Kremlin representative, Bazim had warned him clearly to stop, but Zhenya hadn't bothered to listen. Even when Bazim warned him that he wouldn't be able to avoid Kremlin's consequences if he persisted, Zhenya seemed entirely unphased. In the end, Bazim had no choice but to challenge him to go ahead.

And now, Zhenya was heading to Vladivostok, a place with no concrete ties for him. Bazim couldn't shake the feeling that it had something to do with Kwon Taekjoo. It wasn't clear how South Korea had obtained confidential information or what they had discovered, but finally, all the puzzle pieces seemed to fit together.

"Ah... Yevgeny, finally, you..."

Bazim was utterly stunned. Zhenya wasn't only involved with a man, but he had also betrayed his own family and country. Both in the past and now, Bazim simply couldn't comprehend it.

In any case, it was too late to cover up his efforts now, not when they were so close to the finish line. Besides, Bazim's suspicions about South Korean intelligence operations were just guesses, as he lacked solid proof. As it stood, he could set a trap for them. If everything went as planned, he could kill two birds with one stone.

Lost in thought, Bazim made a call. Despite the late hour, the person on the other end answered immediately.

"It's me, sir. We'll have the test subjects ready soon, just as you asked. There's no need to worry about the consequences. After all, none of them have identifiable identities. Even if they disappear without a trace, nothing will come of it. Yes, I can guarantee that personally. Ah, as for the exact time and date of the experiment... that remains uncertain. But rest assured, the subjects will willingly enter the test tubes. All we have to do is incubate the samples for them."

A wide grin spread across Bazim's face. His previously calm eyes now gleamed with a sharp and sinister light.

With a complicated mix of emotions on his face, Kwon Taekjoo stared intently at Director Kwak through the screen. After deciphering Park Jeong-ho's message, he had requested an emergency meeting with the director via an unofficial channel. Although Kwon Taekjoo was technically in charge of the operation, saving Park Jeong-ho was beyond his jurisdiction. He needed a final resolution and the board of directors' approval.

An unexpected turn of events had occurred during the mission. Typically, the NIS dealt with such situations in one of three ways: continuing with the operation as planned, adjusting their plans based on new information, or withdrawing after assessing the risks. None of these options were within Kwon Taekjoo's authority.

Director Kwak had already grasped the essentials of the situation from Kwon Taekjoo's previous message, but he still seemed skeptical.

[“What do you mean Park Jeong-ho asked for help?”]

“Did you review the video I sent you?”

[“Of course I did. It seems like he’s asking for help, as you said, but we might be misinterpreting his words. Considering how critical this situation is, we need to cross-check. I’ll pass it on to the relevant teams for further analysis.”]

“Haaa... We don’t have much time.”

[“Don’t worry too much. Nothing will come of it. It doesn’t hurt to be cautious. Honestly, our goal isn’t to protect Park Jeong-ho anyway. Who knows if he’s trying to set a trap to get our attention?”]

“If he was, he would have reported the hidden camera to the North Korean security guards and put them on alert about someone spying, instead of disposing of it himself. Also, if others had found out they were being spied on, the hotel, train maintenance workshop, and university wouldn’t be as calm as they are now.”

[“...That’s true, but let’s not jump to conclusions yet. When did Park Jeong-ho realize he was being watched?”]

“Actually, I had a hunch about that and wanted to ask you. The spy camera supplied for this operation was disguised as a cockroach. Was it custom-made to fit the local environment?”

[“I’m not sure. We don’t usually go to such lengths with our devices.”]

“That could be why he noticed. Park Jeong-ho is a biologist. A Korean cockroach wouldn’t look exactly the same as a Russian one, right? An expert like him would notice the difference easily. I think he got suspicious because it didn’t look native to Vladivostok, and then realized it wasn’t a cockroach at all. Since he knew both North Korea and Russia were closely watching him, he might have suspected that a third party was secretly observing him too.”

The current situation of Park Jeong-ho wasn’t much different from being imprisoned. It was clear from the tight surveillance imposed on him by the North Korean guards since his arrival at the airport, and from the way he sat quietly, fully aware of their scrutiny. He had probably discarded the camera after sending his distress signal, in case his message didn't go through or the guards caught him in the act.

If that was the case, it explained all the doubts Kwon Taekjoo had about Park Jeong-ho. And it raised a new question.

What exactly was threatening Park Jeong-ho? There was only one reason that could explain why a renowned biologist was being kept under strict control... likely, his academic convictions conflicted with those of the ruling party and the national interests of his country.

Director Kwak began to mutter under his breath.

[“Alright then. Let’s suppose Park Jeong-ho opposed the government’s leadership, and that’s why they’re treating him this way, just as you said. You’re right; if we can ensure his safety, we could immediately uncover the true purpose behind the upcoming talks between North Korea and Russia and identify the object they’ve been handling so carefully while transporting it from Pyongyang.”]

“It would also eliminate any risks that other agents might face.”

[“Sure. But even so, this situation is unpredictable, so we need to proceed with caution. We have to clearly outline what actions we can and cannot take right now. After all, we’re on Russian territory. Your mission was to uncover the secret between the two nations, not to rescue someone. They must never find out you were there.”]

“I understand, sir. But if we can secure Park Jeong-ho’s safety, we could wrap up this operation immediately. It would also save us the trouble of intercepting the object on the special train and analyzing it ourselves. If it’s as dangerous as we suspect, we could devise a plan to neutralize it before it’s too late.”

Kwon Taekjoo insisted eagerly, but a heavy sigh came from the other side of the call.

[“Do you think rescuing Park Jeong-ho would be the end of it? His family is likely being held hostage in North Korea. If that wasn’t the case, he would have asked for help more urgently. We don’t have the resources to safely rescue both him and his family right now. And even if we contact him and reassure him, there’s no guarantee he would leave his family behind to join us. All of our efforts could go to waste, wouldn’t you agree?”]

“Ah... yes.”

Starting a large-scale conflict now, when they were short on manpower and firepower, wasn’t feasible. Rescuing Park Jeong-ho without leaving a trace was nearly impossible, especially with both North Korean and Russian forces closely watching him.

“So, you want me to just sit here and watch?”

[“We don’t have many options at the moment, do we?”]

“Sir, if Park Jeong-ho has defied the government’s demands, as we suspect, then he’ll be executed once he’s served his purpose at the conference. Needless to say, his family will face the same fate. Don’t you think you might regret this decision later?”

[“Listen, G1. Right now, we’re in a joint operation with our allies, which means we need the approval of both the U.S. and Japan before making any decisions. Coordinating between three nations will be challenging, and convincing them will take time. All we’ll achieve is to increase confusion and distrust among everyone. To be frank, our allies wouldn’t care if a North Korean biologist died during our mission. And there’s no guarantee that just because Park Jeong-ho has shown enmity toward the adversary, he would be more cooperative with us. Defecting from his country doesn’t mean he’ll immediately side with us.”]

Kwon Taekjoo couldn't find a response to Director Kwak's words. He also couldn't be sure Park Jeong-ho would fully support their cause.

"So, should I proceed with the operation as planned?"

["For now, yes. We haven't found anything that justifies deviating from the plan. But stay on high alert in case our operation is exposed. We'll discuss whether we can safely extract Park Jeong-ho, so focus on identifying the object that was transported from Pyongyang by train."]

"Understood, sir," Kwon Taekjoo replied reluctantly as his communicator beeped.

He immediately used his binoculars to scan for any unusual activity around the hotel. There was nothing visibly out of the ordinary, though that could be due to the darkness of the night. The situation with the other agents might be different.

"Sir, I'm receiving a radio call, so I'll have to hang up for now. I'll update you if anything changes," he said, ending the call with Director Kwak and putting the communicator back in his ear.

["Hunting."]

The voice requesting the keyword was none other than the American agent Foxtrot. For some reason, his tone sounded more urgent than usual.

"Two tigers."

["This is Foxtrot. The Russian bastards are unloading the goods from train 677. It's in an icebox and being transferred to a specialized freezer truck."]

"An icebox and a freezer truck... Whatever they're transporting, they can't afford to let it thaw, huh?"

["Seems that way. So, what's our next move? You're not planning on making me sit around and watch again, are you?"]

"Wait for now. There's no movement on our side yet, and I need to check with Sierra..."

A heavy sigh exploded from the communicator. Foxtrot began venting his frustration at Kwon Taekjoo.

["Come on, Alpha. What are you waiting for? We're so close to our target. The fact that there's no activity on your side means they've let their guard down. We should strike while we can!"]

"We don't know how dangerous that object is."

["Damn it! Cut the nonsense, coward! How long are you going to analyze every little detail? Do you think they'll just sit there waiting for us? Once we have the object in our hands, it's only a matter of time before we figure out what it is and how dangerous it is!"]

“Why don’t you stop yelling in my ear? The guards will hear you. And I’ve told you over and over: our goal is to find out what North Korea and Russia are up to, not to steal the object they’re delivering.”

[“Oh, yeah? Why don’t you stop spouting that damn crap? Once we secure the object, it’ll all be over anyway.”]

“Let’s say we do get the object, just as you want. Then what? How do you plan to get it out of the country?”

[“We’d hide it in the embassy and figure out our next moves.”]

Kwon Taekjoo laughed incredulously at his careless response.

“The embassy? That’s the best you’ve got? You couldn’t be more ignorant of the Russians. They’d storm a foreign embassy without thinking twice.”

[“Against the U.S.? They wouldn’t be that reckless unless they wanted to start a full-scale war with us. Even though they’re Russians, they’re not that stupid. And if they are, I’ll blow their brains out myself.”]

Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t tell if Foxtrot was talking nonsense out of excessive patriotism, naïve optimism, or if he simply wanted to show off his nation’s power. He didn’t have the strength left to argue with someone who clearly just wanted to brag.

“Great, good for you. But let me remind you again, don’t act recklessly and ruin everything we’ve been working for.”

[“Ruin everything? Like you’re in any position to say something! If we keep going like this, all we’ll do is stay on their heels. I don’t know how slow you’ve been with your work, but as a leader, you shouldn’t ruin everyone else’s progress!”] Foxtrot shouted, furious.

Kwon Taekjoo knew all too well that he was dealing with a hotheaded fool, and he was well aware of the risk that came with someone acting emotionally during a critical moment in the mission. However, he couldn’t just sit back while Foxtrot blatantly disregarded his orders.

In any espionage operation, the leader’s orders were absolute, especially when the failure of the mission could cost team members their lives. If one member was acting independently out of defiance, there was only one way to handle it.

“Foxtrot, you’re out of this operation,” Kwon Taekjoo said calmly. His final order to Foxtrot revealed not a trace of emotion.

[“What?”]

A scornful laugh came from the other side of the communicator. Foxtrot’s next words were even more enraged.

[“Oh, so now that you’ve bossed me around, you want to tell me to screw off?”]

“A team member who refuses to cooperate is a ticking time bomb that endangers everyone else. It’s only logical to eliminate any potential risks, no matter how small.”

Kwon Taekjoo didn’t let a hint of anger slip into his voice. He remained firm, with a determined and calm attitude, immune to any words of persuasion, compromise, or threat. Foxtrot let out another sigh and clicked his tongue.

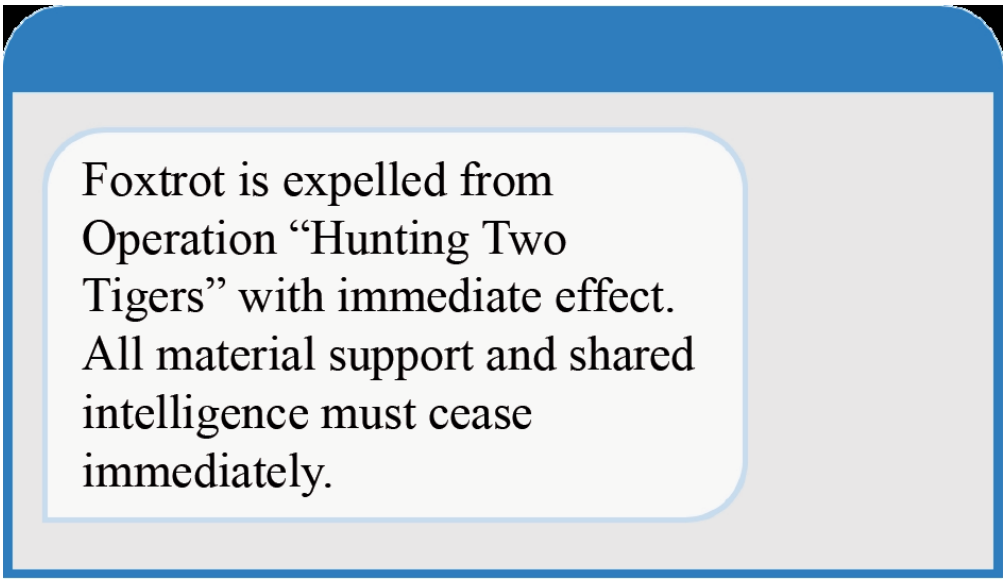
[“Fine, I’m out. Why don’t you two Asian buddies figure it out yourselves?!”]

Foxtrot made sure to leave with a sarcastic and biting remark. A sharp, crackling static burst in Kwon Taekjoo’s ear. Apparently, Foxtrot had smashed his own communicator in a fit of rage. Kwon Taekjoo frowned and took the device out of his ear, the unexpected explosion of noise rattling his brain.

"That racist jerk! Talking like a damned idiot."

Kwon Taekjoo’s breathing grew heavy with anger as he vented his frustration. If Foxtrot had said those words to his face, he would have gladly punched him. As he expected, working with others didn’t suit him, especially when he didn’t have full control over the team and his colleagues came from different countries.

Irritated, Kwon Taekjoo ran a hand through his hair and took a deep breath to calm himself. With a frustrated gesture, he opened the team’s messaging app. Despite his anger, he knew he had to do his job right. He needed to report to Director Kwak and the backup team about Foxtrot’s departure from the operation and contact Sierra, as the item in question was still in transit.


Foxtrot is expelled from Operation “Hunting Two Tigers” with immediate effect. All material support and shared intelligence must cease immediately.

As soon as he sent the message, his work phone began ringing. It was another call from headquarters. Kwon Taekjoo let out a tired sigh before answering: “Yes?”

["What’s this about you suddenly expelling Foxtrot from the operation?"]

"It is what it is. He refused to follow orders and kept crossing lines. If I had let that bastard continue, he would've caused trouble sooner or later, endangering both Sierra and me. Please convince those fools in the U.S. that they either need to withdraw as defensive support or replace him with someone who actually listens."

["That's not even remotely reasonable. How are they supposed to find a replacement right away?"]

"How would I know? If they really can't do anything, just tell them to sit back and enjoy the ride."

["Let's not complicate things when we're at a crucial point in the operation. We should ask them to convince that agent to return and..."]

"If they can manage to convince him, sure. He's as stubborn as a mule. Honestly, it would be a relief if he doesn't cause any..."

Before Kwon Taekjoo could finish his sentence, a thunderous explosion echoed in the distance. He jumped to his feet and rushed to the window, aiming his scope in the direction of the sound. Soon enough, a small but unmistakable flame was burning in the distance.

["What happened? What was that sound just now?"]

"It came from the southeast direction, from an overpass 18 km away... it must be the Russky Bridge. Something exploded on the access ramp."

["Are you sure?"]

"Yes. All traffic on the Russky Bridge has been blocked since midnight, so it couldn't have been an ordinary accident. I need to check it out. I'll report back later."

He quickly ended the call with Director Kwak and watched the growing flames with anxious concern. His heart pounded in his chest, and an unsettling chill crept up his spine.

Trying to shake off the uneasy feeling, he left his hideout and headed to the rooftop. After kicking through the worn-out door, he turned in the direction of the explosion. It was unmistakable... it had come from the Russky Bridge.

"What the hell is going on... don't tell me it was Foxtrot?"

Had Foxtrot gone rogue because Kwon Taekjoo had ordered him to stay out of the operation? He debated what to do, his mind swirling with ominous thoughts, when suddenly his communicator buzzed. It was a message from Sierra.

["Alpha. What was that explosion?"]

Sierra sounded clearly shaken, demanding an explanation without even asking for the usual passphrase. Before Kwon Taekjoo could respond, they began urgently reporting the situation at the Far Eastern Federal University.

["Things aren't looking too good here either! All the soldiers and guards are outside inspecting the area."]

"I think Foxtrot did something on his own."

["What?"]

"That damned bastard went and screwed everything up!"

Kwon Taekjoo gritted his teeth. Just then, a siren began wailing not far away. Police cars, fire trucks, and special forces vehicles switched on their emergency lights and rushed to the scene.

The enemy also seemed to go into crisis mode upon seeing the unexpected situation. Black vans quickly surrounded the hotel, and armed security guards poured out of them.

If the explosion on the Russky Bridge had really been caused by Foxtrot, as Kwon Taekjoo suspected, it was only a matter of time before their operation was exposed. In fact, it might already be compromised. He needed to wrap things up immediately.

"Sierra, hide now. I'll contact you later."

Kwon Taekjoo abruptly ended communications and turned around. He had to destroy his hideout and flee before the enemy could corner him.

Suppressing curses in his haste to get downstairs, he yanked open the rooftop door when suddenly his vision darkened. It was as if a massive wall had appeared in front of him.

"....."

Kwon Taekjoo's entire body froze, but he instinctively aimed his gun at the intruder. However, as he did so, a pair of pale hands covered both his mouth and the barrel of his gun. Kwon Taekjoo tensed, ready to pull the trigger, but hesitated. The hand restraining him felt oddly familiar, and the figure appearing in his peripheral vision seemed recognizable. The touch and pressure of the hand against his face, combined with a familiar scent wafting into his nose, confirmed his suspicions.

"... Zhenya?" he murmured in confusion.

Suddenly, a sharp sting pierced his neck. The unmistakable scent of a drug overwhelmed his senses, making him feel weak and dazed almost instantly.

"Uugh, what are you...!"

"You're going to want to take a nap for a while, Taekjoo."

Kwon Taekjoo writhed in the grip, but the man only held him tighter. Every detail—from the intensifying scent, the body heat, the touch, and the voice—was unmistakably Zhenya.

But why? How?

The questions swirling in his mind quickly faded as he lost consciousness. As he slipped into a deep sleep, the shrill wail of countless sirens drilled into his ears.

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Chapter End Notes

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Cease Fire

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•SPANISH DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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A deafening explosion tore through the air, followed by a shockwave that hit Kwon Taekjoo's ears. His dazed consciousness struggled to distinguish reality from fiction. A mechanical, piercing ringing reverberated in his eardrums, rattling his brain. It wasn't until the noise faded that he finally opened his eyes.

The sharp chemical smell of drugs, clinging to his body, invaded his nostrils, stabbing into his head like a needle. Even breathing felt nauseating.

Kwon Taekjoo slowly inhaled and sifted through the chaotic whirlwind of his thoughts, trying to identify his last memory. If he remembered correctly, he had been ambushed in his hideout. Had he lost consciousness there? Then, where was he now?

His eyes flew open wide, and he sat up abruptly, freezing in place. A stabbing pain shot through his skull due to his sudden upright posture.

"Agh…"

An involuntary groan escaped his lips. Kwon Taekjoo gritted his teeth, feeling a rising frustration as he scanned his surroundings. The environment seemed eerily familiar. Everything, from the smell of the air to the feel of the sheets against his skin, struck him as unsettlingly familiar.

Was this a dream? It couldn't be real.

Instinctively, he ran his hand over his body. His gun holster was empty. His eyes swept the room, landing on the gun resting on the nightstand next to the bed. But his communicator and

phone were nowhere to be seen.

It didn't take long for Kwon Taekjoo to grab the gun and check the magazine. It was fully loaded. Hadn't he pulled the trigger after being ambushed? What the hell had happened? Suddenly, as if cutting through the fog, his last memory came rushing back.

"... Zhenya?"

He had met Zhenya on the rooftop of the building he had turned into his hideout. Although he hadn't been able to clearly see his face, his silhouette, scent, and touch were unmistakable. It had undoubtedly been Zhenya.

But why? How had he shown up there? And how had Kwon Taekjoo ended up on Ajinoki Island?

A flood of questions bombarded his mind, one after another. Kwon Taekjoo felt overwhelmed. Maybe it had all been some kind of deranged dream, or maybe he was still dreaming. Yet amid the confusion, a sinister possibility, one he refused to acknowledge, crept into reality. He tried to dismiss the suspicion, telling himself it couldn't be true… but a sense of unease gnawed at his mind.

Just then, a series of footsteps echoed in the hallway. The sound was faint, barely noticeable to most people, but not to Kwon Taekjoo. He immediately recognized the weight and rhythm of each step. His eyes narrowed, fixed on the door.

The approaching footsteps stopped right behind it. The doorknob slowly turned, and the door creaked open, revealing Zhenya standing in the doorway.

Zhenya's eyebrows lifted when he saw that Kwon Taekjoo was awake. A smug smile curled at the corner of his lips as he stepped into the room. But for some reason, a strange burnt smell clung to him, masking his usual scent.

"You always greet me with a gun in my face. One of these days, you might actually shoot me."

Zhenya smiled as he glanced at the barrel pointed directly at him. He seemed completely at ease, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Kwon Taekjoo's expression darkened, his gaze turning cold as ice.

So it hadn't been a mistake. He had encountered Zhenya just before everything went black. Kwon Taekjoo wished it had all been a dream or a figment of his imagination. But now, seeing Zhenya standing there so brazenly only complicated his already frantic thoughts.

"What happened?" Kwon Taekjoo asked. His voice was dangerously low, not just because he was hoarse from fainting. Yet despite the tension, Zhenya shrugged with indifference.

"Why don't you eat something first? You won't be able to think straight on an empty stomach. Besides, a hungry animal is always more restless. How about some ramen?"

He turned as if he were about to head to the kitchen. Was he seriously talking about ramen right now? Kwon Taekjoo's head throbbed with rage.

"I asked you what happened," Kwon Taekjoo snapped, glaring at Zhenya's back.

Zhenya paused and slowly turned to face him again, scrutinizing Kwon Taekjoo's stern expression. After a long moment of silence, an unexpected reply came from him.

"You've been unconscious for half a day."

"... What?"

"I wanted to use something milder, but all I had on me was the strong stuff," Zhenya said, tapping his neck.

Kwon Taekjoo instinctively touched his own neck. A sharp pain, followed by numbness, pulsed from the spot he touched. The wound was far worse than it should have been, likely because Zhenya had stabbed the needle in forcefully, and Kwon Taekjoo had resisted.

"You're doing pretty well for someone who should be too drugged to even sit up. I have to admit, I admire that pride of yours."

Zhenya gave him a nonchalant smile. He acted as if nothing had happened, even though he had tracked down Kwon Taekjoo and ruined his mission. Kwon Taekjoo couldn't understand how Zhenya had figured everything out so quickly and easily. Suddenly, his simmering anger transformed into a heavy weight collapsing at his feet.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"What do I think I'm doing?" Zhenya repeated, pretending not to understand, then let out a deliberate *"Ah."* One side of his mouth curled into a smirk as he teased Kwon Taekjoo. *"Are you mad because I put you to sleep? But Taekjoo, you did the same to me."*

Zhenya flashed a brazen grin, as if the entire situation was nothing more than a joke. Kwon Taekjoo's eyebrows knitted together, his nose wrinkling in a scowl as he fought to contain his rage.

"Enough games. Explain what's going on. Why are you here?"

"Here? What's the problem? Can't I come? This is my island and my home."

"Are you fucking kidding me right now?!" Kwon Taekjoo exploded, unable to suppress his fury any longer.

Zhenya's eyes widened slightly at his sudden outburst, but he quickly regained his composure. He maintained a blank expression, as if he had no idea what was going on.

"You shouldn't be here right now, you bastard!" Kwon Taekjoo shouted, his words tumbling out in a choked, furious tone. His clenched fists trembled, knuckles white from the tension. Zhenya's pupils contracted slightly as he took in every detail of his changes.

But that was it. Zhenya's expression remained the same. He still didn't seem to understand what he had done wrong or why Kwon Taekjoo was so angry with him.

"Taekjoo," he murmured in an infuriatingly calm voice. *"Why are you mad at me again?"*

Kwon Taekjoo's tangled emotions seemed to be ripping apart at that question. His voice, tense, rough, and brimming with frustration, burst from his throat.

"I told you not to follow me! Especially not this time! Are you deaf?!"

"I didn't follow you. I came to save you."

"What did you just say?"

"My lover was about to throw himself blindly into danger. What else could I do but try to stop him?"

An incredulous laugh escaped Kwon Taekjoo's lips. Such a harmless comment from a man who crushed others like insects without a second thought. His heart sank, a hollow weight collapsing onto his chest.

It might have been the lingering effects of the drugs or the anger still surging through his veins, but Kwon Taekjoo's vision seemed to blur at times. His legs trembled, threatening to give way beneath him. A suffocating heat took over his body, causing his breathing to become shallow and erratic. Irritated, he wiped his damp forehead.

Zhenya had shown up right after the explosion had ripped through the Russky Bridge. Given the timing and circumstances, Kwon Taekjoo suspected it had been Foxtrot acting recklessly after being kicked off the team operation. But he wasn't sure if it had really been him, and it still wasn't clear whether they had secured the cargo. Foxtrot might even have been taken down by the enemy right there.

One thing was certain—the explosion had blown their cover, and now the enemy knew there were spies among them. Alarms blared in all directions, and armed police swarmed the Russky Bridge, the hotel, and the Far Eastern Federal University. Engaging in a counterattack against such overwhelming numbers would have been suicidal. They had no choice but to abandon the mission and wait for another chance. Kwon Taekjoo had ordered Sierra to retreat and was about to do the same when Zhenya appeared. Somehow, he knew exactly where to find him, even though Kwon Taekjoo had cut off all lines of communication to make sure there was no way Zhenya could track him.

Kwon Taekjoo was well aware that Zhenya had been watching his every move for some time. He had warned him repeatedly to stop, but it was clear Zhenya would never listen.

That's why, this time, Kwon Taekjoo had been especially cautious. He only used new devices for his communications and had the agency set up a private phone line and account. He had even scanned his entire body for hidden microphones or tracking devices.

But it had all been for nothing because Zhenya stood in front of him, as bold as ever. The outcome wasn't entirely unexpected. Kwon Taekjoo had anticipated it, which was why he had gone to such lengths to keep Zhenya on good terms before traveling to Vladivostok. He had put in so much effort to avoid making him an enemy, because a fight with him was the last thing he wanted. But now, seeing how things had played out, he felt like a complete fool.

The very outcome he feared had become reality. Despite repeated warnings from the NIS, Kwon Taekjoo had assured them he would handle it, promising that Zhenya wouldn't interfere again. But now, that promise seemed like a joke. Worst of all, Zhenya could be involved with the twisted alliance between North Korea and Russia. In truth, Kwon Taekjoo had no reason to think otherwise.

Kwon Taekjoo let out a heavy sigh. He turned his gaze to Zhenya, his eyes sharp and dangerous. *"Don't tell me…" he said, his voice faltering, "...that you're working with them?"*

"Them? You mean my family?" Zhenya scoffed, a crooked smile twisting his lips as he stared at Kwon Taekjoo. *"Is that your conclusion from all this? I'm still your lover. You really don't trust me, do you?"*

"If it's not that, then what is it, you bastard?"

"I kept the promise you forced on me. And strangely enough, this time, I actually wanted to keep it," Zhenya replied, shaking his head.

He had already blatantly sabotaged Kwon Taekjoo's mission—what promise was he claiming to keep? Anger surged through Kwon Taekjoo at Zhenya's nonchalant attitude. It sounded like he was toying with him.

"What the hell are you talking about? Are you seriously saying it's just a coincidence you're here right now?"

"No, it was inevitable," Zhenya shot back quickly. Kwon Taekjoo was baffled, unable to make sense of what was happening, while Zhenya remained annoyingly calm, as if he had all the time in the world.

"If you're asking whether I knew what my brother... my family was plotting, yes, I knew. Or rather, I found out after you left, Taekjoo. You told me not to follow you, but you never said I couldn't spy on my brothers. So I never broke my word."

Was he saying he learned about the operation by spying on Bazim instead of him? It sounded plausible, but right now, Kwon Taekjoo didn't care.

The real issue was that Zhenya had shown up on his mission again. From now on, the NIS's suspicions would only get worse. Kwon Taekjoo had no idea how Zhenya had managed to cross enemy lines and bring him to Ajinoki Island. If Zhenya had been exposed, Russia or his family might now consider him a traitor.

Zhenya had already betrayed his family more than once by helping Kwon Taekjoo, but this time, he might have severed all ties. Everything Kwon Taekjoo had been fighting for

collapsed in an instant. His frustration boiled over.

"Damn it… I told you not to interfere with my work! This is my business, not yours!"

"Taekjoo, I would've stayed out of it if you hadn't thrown yourself into danger so recklessly. I wanted to keep our promise this time too."

Zhenya kept repeating the same thing over and over. No words seemed to reach him. This wasn't the first time either. No matter how much Kwon Taekjoo tried to reason with him, it was like talking to a brick wall. Talking to a wall might have been less disappointing.

Kwon Taekjoo held back the storm brewing inside him, clenching his teeth so hard the veins in his neck and forehead throbbed. When he finally spoke, his voice was hollow.

"You always undermine me like this."

Zhenya tilted his head at Kwon Taekjoo's low words, his tone dripping with such disdain that Zhenya couldn't ignore it.

"Throwing myself into danger? Recklessly?" Kwon Taekjoo snapped, lashing out at Zhenya. He couldn't stand the calm, exasperating look on his face any longer.

"How the fuck would you know, you bastard?! Why do you always assume I'm going to fail? What am I to you? An idiot who can't handle things without your help?!"

"You're getting mad for no reason again. From the start, I knew you were doomed. I didn't need to see it myself."

"Get off your damn high horse. I've been taking risks long before you came on the scene. You think I've always had an easy job? If I cared so much about my own safety, I wouldn't be in this line of work!"

Kwon Taekjoo's enraged voice echoed through the house. Zhenya simply watched him with the same calm expression as always. A flash of confusion flickered across his face before it vanished, replaced by a mocking smile.

"You seem awfully sure of yourself. But so what? Did you even manage to find out what kind of deal was being made between Russia and North Korea?"

Zhenya immediately answered his own question. *"No, you didn't. Because you didn't have enough time. And the security would've been too tight for you to get close to your target."*

Then, he tilted his head, as if daring Kwon Taekjoo to prove him wrong.

Kwon Taekjoo felt a sharp sting of irritation and shot back, *"The North Korean guards transporting the cargo were fully suited up in protective gear. That means whatever they were carrying was dangerous, probably too dangerous to handle directly. And Russia must be planning to use it to develop a biological weapon or some vaccine for their own benefit."*

“Exactly. Ricin, novichok, VX, polonium 210… They must’ve found something on Mount Baekdu that could rival those toxins.”

Ricin, novichok, VX, and polonium 210 were infamous for their deadly toxicity. If any of them were absorbed by the human body, the survival rate would be almost zero. For this reason, they were more often used as assassination tools than weapons.

And now something just as lethal had been discovered on Mount Baekdu. It finally made sense why a biologist from Mount Baekdu had been dragged to Russia, and why he had desperately sought the help of a spy.

As Kwon Taekjoo got lost in his thoughts, Zhenya pressed on in a calm tone.

“Don’t you understand? The Kremlin already has access to toxins like ricin, novichok, and VX whenever they need them. But they still showed interest in a microorganism that was just discovered in North Korea. That means they’ve already determined that this microbe is far more dangerous than any of the deadly toxins the world already knows. If you’re infected by it, there’s no cure. You wouldn’t even know how it would kill you. Were you planning to let yourself get captured and become a living test subject?”

“That’s part of my job—to take risks like that.”

“Oh? So you’re saying you don’t care if you die doing your precious work? And I’m just supposed to sit back and watch? You fought desperately to survive when you fell into my hands, but now you’re willing to throw it all away? That’s the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard from you. Taekjoo, stop being so stubborn. Is that really what you want?”

Zhenya's smile faltered for a moment, his face turning cold and severe. He quickly masked it with a grin, but it was clear that he was growing angry as well. His distorted tone betrayed his rising frustration.

“Risking your life recklessly just because it’s your job... Who’s going to recognize your sacrifice?”

Kwon Taekjoo pressed his lips into a thin line, glaring at Zhenya. Zhenya stared back, unfazed, and continued with his sarcastic comment.

“Is that what your grand patriotism boils down to, Taekjoo? Hmm?”

“Don’t mock me just because it’s not something you care about.”

“Mock you? When have I ever done that?”

Zhenya shook his head slowly. The motion was lazy, almost as if mocking him, but he didn’t seem very pleased either.

“Right now, I’m angry with you, Taekjoo. Whether you live or die isn’t just about you anymore, is it?”

"....."

“You promised me you wouldn’t die. You asked me to trust you.”

Looking at Kwon Taekjoo in silence, Zhenya suddenly moved closer. His steps weren’t fast, but Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t help but flinch. His instincts flagged Zhenya as a clear threat.

“That you wouldn’t throw yourself recklessly into danger,” Zhenya continued, casting doubt on the promise Kwon Taekjoo had made earlier to comfort him. Slowly, he began to close the distance between them.

“Haven’t I told you again and again? If you want to throw yourself into danger and play hero, go ahead. I’ll chase after you every time you do. But if I grant you that freedom, the least you can do is entrust me with your pathetic life, instead of acting like you’re invincible.”

“Do you see? That’s what I mean. You always look down on me as if I’m some kind of fool. Maybe it’s not obvious to you, but I’m always giving it my damn best. Even without all the information, even when the odds are stacked against me, I always try to find a way out. And now you’re calling me reckless? Do you even know what’s been haunting me these days? If you did, you wouldn’t be able to insult me like that. Sure, I used to throw myself blindly like you said, but now I question every step. Do you have any idea how much I’ve agonized over this mission?!”

“Stubborn to the end, huh? Taekjoo, it’s not my fault your country lacks information. And it’s definitely not my fault your temporary partner decided to go rogue and blow himself up. So, how about you stop taking out your frustrations on someone innocent?”

Kwon Taekjoo raised the gun again. Zhenya tilted his head, raising an eyebrow as if witnessing something abnormal.

However, this time it wasn’t an empty threat or a release of pent-up anger. Kwon Taekjoo was done, done with letting Zhenya brush things off, tired and sick of convincing himself that Zhenya would never understand him anyway.

He steadied himself, aiming the gun directly at Zhenya. But Zhenya kept walking toward him without the slightest hesitation.

“Don’t come any closer,” he growled through gritted teeth. Zhenya ignored the warning and reached out toward Kwon Taekjoo.

“Don’t waste your energy trying to stop me. There’s nothing you can do anymore. Right now, everyone is in a rush to hunt down a certain little rabbit. You should rest until the storm passes, Taekjoo.”

A large, pale hand reached toward Kwon Taekjoo’s face. His finger twitched on the trigger, but in the end, he couldn’t pull it. Instead, he grabbed Zhenya’s wrist and shoved his chin away.

“I told you not to—!”

Zhenya pressed against him, using his full weight to pin him down, while Kwon Taekjoo desperately fought back. He shoved his knees and elbows into Zhenya, striking the arm trying to cover his mouth, but Zhenya didn't relent.

The two of them wrestled for a long time, pushing and pulling each other violently. Multiple scratches, both big and small, appeared on their skin from the constant struggle. Kwon Taekjoo's joints felt like they were being pushed to the limit.

Neither of them gave in, fighting fiercely for what felt like ages. Kwon Taekjoo's body soon became drenched in sweat. The intense fight ended when his knees buckled. His head began to spin—probably the drug taking effect again.

Zhenya didn't waste time. He shoved Kwon Taekjoo onto the bed, pinning his arms down with brute strength. Kwon Taekjoo kicked wildly, landing blows to Zhenya's abdomen and sides, but Zhenya locked his knees against his legs, trapping him in place. Finally, the fight came to an end. Their breaths were heavy and erratic as they glared furiously at each other.

That's when Kwon Taekjoo got a clear look at Zhenya's face. There were fresh wounds, along with the ones Kwon Taekjoo had inflicted in the fight moments ago, and a small clot of dried blood had formed on his ear lobe. Now that Kwon Taekjoo examined him closely, Zhenya didn't look his usual self. His hair was disheveled, and the sleeves of his shirt were stained with dust, when he was normally so meticulous about cleanliness.

But above all, the most unusual thing was the sharp, burnt odor clinging to Zhenya instead of his usual scent. Kwon Taekjoo had been too furious with him for knocking him out and ruining his mission to even think about how Zhenya had escaped or managed to get to Ajinoki Island through the chaos.

Without a doubt, the situation outside the island was already a mess. If the enemy had realized Zhenya intervened, they were likely tracking him down to launch a counterattack. In fact, they might already be doing just that.

Once again, Zhenya had stood against his brothers, his family, and his country... all to save him.

"...Damn it," Kwon Taekjoo cursed, dropping his head. His jaw clenched as he gritted his teeth. Zhenya always left him feeling helpless, using his love and affection like a relentless weapon.

"Taekjoo. You're breathing heavily."

Kwon Taekjoo noticed that his breathing was becoming alarmingly fast, his chest heaving. His shoulders shook uncontrollably against his will. He was hyperventilating from the overwhelming stress. No matter how hard he tried to slow his breath, inhaling deeply, it wasn't working.

Zhenya watched him closely and sat him up. Though Kwon Taekjoo was no longer pinned down, he couldn't move a single muscle.

Zhenya briefly stepped out of the room and returned with a paper bag, pressing it over Kwon Taekjoo's nose and mouth. Kwon Taekjoo grimaced in distress but managed to grab onto the collar of Zhenya's shirt.

"Breathe. Slowly," Zhenya murmured softly.

As Kwon Taekjoo took deep breaths, his consciousness began to blur. He wasn't sure if it was due to the lack of oxygen or the medication still in his system. He frowned, fighting to keep his eyes open, but eventually, his eyelids fell shut. At the same time, his grip on Zhenya loosened, and his hand dropped limply.

"There you go, just rest for now."

Zhenya's voice faded into the distance.

"....."

When Kwon Taekjoo opened his eyes, a large window filled his vision. Outside, the world seemed strangely peaceful and serene... revealing a landscape of lush greenery. Blinding rays of sunlight filtered through the dense branches, and a gentle breeze stirred the bushes below.

He blinked slowly, his senses returning to reality, but then froze at the sound of soft breathing behind him. The warmth of a body pressed against his back and the familiar grip on his wrists was all too recognizable.

As his awareness sharpened, he realized that Zhenya was practically clinging to his back. He had him tightly wrapped up, with Kwon Taekjoo's arms crossed over his own chest, holding him in place. Zhenya had his face buried in Kwon Taekjoo's neck, and his long legs were tangled up with his. The embrace left him completely and utterly immobilized.

Kwon Taekjoo had no idea how long they had been like this, or how much time had passed since he abandoned his mission without warning. His head still felt weak and sluggish, though the worst of the headache had passed. The remaining traces of the drug in his system seemed to have worked their way out while he slept.

However, new red marks stained his skin from his earlier fight with Zhenya. Zhenya's hand, now gripping his arm, hadn't come out unscathed either.

Kwon Taekjoo let out a deep sigh. It wasn't loud, but it was enough to cause Zhenya's breathing to hitch. Without even turning around, Kwon Taekjoo knew he was awake.

"...Let go of me."

Zhenya's hold only tightened in response to the quiet demand. Instead, he pressed his forehead insistently into Kwon Taekjoo's shoulder.

"I said, let go."

A barely contained tremor of anger edged into Kwon Taekjoo's voice, but Zhenya stubbornly refused to release him. The grip on Kwon Taekjoo's wrists intensified. His skin paled, and the veins in his hands started to bulge.

Kwon Taekjoo exhaled in frustration. The crushing grip threatening to break his arms loosened just slightly. Taking advantage of the moment, he tried to shrug Zhenya off using his shoulders and hips, even delivering an elbow jab when the hold weakened. But it was futile. All it did was grant him a bit more freedom in his limbs.

Another silent struggle ensued as Zhenya tried to pin him down even more firmly, preventing his escape. They wrestled, pulling and twisting each other's arms and hands. Then, a loud snap echoed between them. Kwon Taekjoo wasn't sure if it came from Zhenya's finger or his own wrist, but it was enough to break them apart.

Kwon Taekjoo rolled off the bed as Zhenya sat up. They faced each other from opposite sides.

"Aah, aah... aah..."

"...Taekjoo. Come here," Zhenya murmured in a deceptively calm tone. But Kwon Taekjoo knew all too well that it was only the calm before the storm.

Kwon Taekjoo's gaze drifted toward the floor, where his feet had collided with something. He wasn't sure how it had ended up there, but he found his gun lying on the ground. Slowly, he raised his eyes to meet Zhenya's once more. Zhenya shook his head silently, as if he already knew what Kwon Taekjoo was thinking.

Kwon Taekjoo locked eyes with Zhenya's blue ones, then lifted his gun. As soon as he did, Zhenya lunged forward. Kwon Taekjoo aimed the barrel at him, and Zhenya stopped dead in his tracks. Their fiery gazes clashed.

"....."

"....."

They stared at each other with a dangerous gleam in their eyes. The dark look in Kwon Taekjoo's eyes held no trace of love or remorse for his lover standing before him. It was as if they had been burned away by the flames of rage, which had risen to his head and consumed any last glimmer of light.

Kwon Taekjoo lightly pressed the trigger, but Zhenya remained still, refusing to move out of the gun's path. He simply watched Kwon Taekjoo, holding his breath in silence. Kwon Taekjoo's finger tensed on the trigger, his muscles tightening. His bloodshot eyes trembled. Just a little more pressure, and it would all be over.

In the midst of the silence engulfing them, Kwon Taekjoo's body began to send warning signals. His head felt like it was going to explode from the weight of everything happening. Finally, he furrowed his brow and yanked his hands down. The unbearable tension shattered in an instant.

Kwon Taekjoo turned around and headed for the door. Zhenya watched him go, but Kwon Taekjoo ignored him. His hand was just about to touch the doorknob when Zhenya's voice broke the silence.

"Are you really going to leave like this?"

Kwon Taekjoo said nothing. He moved his hand again to open the door. He was ready to leave when Zhenya's voice echoed behind him once more.

"You can't just walk away from me like this, Taekjoo."

There was no anger in Zhenya's voice, only a wounded, almost resentful tone. A flood of memories rushed through Kwon Taekjoo's mind... Leaving Zhenya behind on Ajinoki Island while he screamed for him, trying to abandon Zhenya in the motel after he got hurt protecting him, all the times he had sidelined Zhenya for the sake of his missions... He even remembered that last argument, where he'd spat cruel words and walked away as if he'd never look back. And yet, through all of it, Zhenya had still ordered malatang for him.

The guilt Kwon Taekjoo had tried to bury beneath empty apologies and hollow reassurances now weighed on him like a heavy burden.

He couldn't have been a worse lover to Zhenya.

Kwon Taekjoo pressed his lips together, barely holding back the storm of emotions threatening to break loose. Now wasn't the time to let personal feelings take over.

He was about to leave when Zhenya grabbed him again, holding him tightly.

"I never said you could go."

"I don't need your permission."

"Ha. You're always doing whatever you want. I've been giving you too much freedom lately, haven't I?"

Zhenya's mocking tone twisted his arrogant words. Kwon Taekjoo turned to face him, his cheek visibly tense. His voice was colder than ever.

"You're always like this, acting superior and looking down on everyone else..."

"So, it's my fault again?"

Even now, Zhenya was still arguing about who was to blame. What exactly was going through his mind? A heavy knot tightened in Kwon Taekjoo's chest.

"Is that really all you can think about?"

"I think you're the one making things complicated."

"...Ah... Forget it. We've never agreed on anything, anyway."

The whispered words that followed his sigh were bitter and full of resignation. At this point, Kwon Taekjoo just wanted to let everything go, to abandon anything that made him feel less and less like himself.

Zhenya must have sensed the shift in him, as the tension between them grew sharp.

"Taekjoo," Zhenya said coldly, his voice rougher than before.

“Don’t say anything else.”

Zhenya’s next words came out as a cold threat.

“There’s a limit to how much I can take. Stop crossing the line.”

Ignoring him would’ve been the right move. Arguing now would only lead to another meaningless fight, and they both needed space to cool their minds and emotions. But Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t help but explode in rage.

“Crossing the line? Me? Do you really think you’re in a position to say that now, you bastard? What about you? You always make every decision your way and do whatever the hell you want! You don’t give a damn what anyone else thinks, you damn bastard!”

His furious voice echoed through the house, bouncing off the walls and circling them both.

Despite everything, Zhenya seemed completely unbothered. He just kept criticizing; his face emotionless.

“Who’s acting like a child now? Haven’t you had enough of this tantrum?”

“You think I’m throwing a tantrum right now?”

“Oh, aren’t you? All I hear is that I should keep putting up with whatever you do. How much do you expect me to take? Do you really think I’m your dog just because I decided to be kind once? Is that it? Am I supposed to guard the house like an obedient dog and wag my tail when you come back?”

“Like hell, if you don’t want to, then just leave! I told you, this is who I am! I can’t change!”

“No, it’s that you just don’t want to. You have no intention of changing.”

The sharp accusation left Kwon Taekjoo speechless. A grinding sound escaped through his clenched teeth, followed by a frustrated sigh he had been struggling to suppress.

Zhenya’s face twisted with anger as well. He shook his head slowly and continued to rant at Kwon Taekjoo.

“You’re always trying to control me like this. You sweet-talk me, flatter me, praise me when it suits you, only to turn around and threaten me when things don’t go your way.”

“Ha... Haven’t you realized anything in all this time you had to think? You’re a grown man, why the hell do I have to comfort you like a child? How long do I have to put up with that nonsense? Not even a little kid acts like you...”

I’m getting tired of all this crap.

Kwon Taekjoo swallowed those last words before they escaped his mouth. Who knew what kind of damage that one sentence, barely more than a sigh, might cause? Zhenya hadn’t moved all this time, but now he was slowly rising, as if ready to strike at any moment. Kwon Taekjoo decided to speak first.

“Leave me alone.”

As soon as Kwon Taekjoo told him not to follow or come near him, Zhenya hesitated, like he had hit the brakes. He stood frozen, watching Kwon Taekjoo’s every move. Even that was a rare display of patience from Zhenya. Seeing him like that only twisted Kwon Taekjoo’s emotions further, making him run a hand through his hair in frustration.

“Give me some time. I need to calm down, organize my emotions, and figure out what to do about my work. Until then... I don’t think I can stand to look at your face,” Kwon Taekjoo said calmly, holding back his anger. Staying locked in this confrontation, venting their frustrations on each other, would only leave them both full of regrets.

But Zhenya didn’t seem willing to accept it. He stood up as if he was prepared to stop Kwon Taekjoo from leaving. In an instant, the tension between them intensified. Even the scent of Zhenya seemed to hang heavily in the air.

“All that, and now you’re just going to leave like that?”

“I already told you, I need some time. I’m begging you, just stay here. Nothing good will come out of us being together right now.”

“And if you leave on your own? Do you really think you’re capable of sorting things out?”

“What?”

“Just look at you, Taekjoo. You need a reality check,” Zhenya demanded.

He expressed his hurt feelings by lashing out at Kwon Taekjoo, as if he didn’t know how else to express his emotions. Although outwardly a grown man, inside he was still young and inexperienced. The problem was, this unstable and imperfect man’s lover wasn’t a patient or understanding soul, nor was he someone willing to teach him everything gently.

“Why don’t you get a reality check, bastard?! Just because we’re happy doesn’t mean that’s all that matters... We’re not in a position to mess around!”

“That’s why I’m asking you. What do you think you can do?”

Zhenya’s words crushed and belittled Kwon Taekjoo’s determination. He always saw himself as superior, believing he was always right. He looked down on others, even his own lover.

Even now, he issued a firm warning, dismissing Kwon Taekjoo's efforts as insignificant.

"You can resist all you want, but nothing will change. It was like this before, and it'll be the same in the future."

Suddenly, a loud thud echoed through the air. Kwon Taekjoo had punched the doorframe. Instantly, the atmosphere turned icy, the sharp tension making their skin prickle. Kwon Taekjoo stared ahead, struggling to control his ragged breathing. His eyes were shadowed by his bangs, but Zhenya could tell by his tightly clenched lips that he was at his breaking point.

"Are you done?"

The word that finally left his mouth after a long pause was a question, but not really meant as one. Kwon Taekjoo finally lost his patience and stormed out of the bedroom, his steps firm and unyielding.

He was about to climb the stairs leading to the rooftop when a stray bullet shattered the varnish on one of the higher steps. Turning around, he saw Zhenya standing with a shotgun in hand. On the ground, his shadow loomed menacingly.

"Taekjoo. Are you really going to make me blow up the NIS?"

"Go ahead, do it," Kwon Taekjoo replied coldly. *"Then I'll have no reason to ever see you again."*

His nose wrinkled in a snarl as he locked eyes with Zhenya, his gaze devoid of any warmth. Zhenya stared back with an equally dangerous look. They held each other's gaze for a long moment until, finally, Kwon Taekjoo turned his head and began to walk away again.

But after just a few steps, he was yanked back. Zhenya had closed the distance in an instant, trapping him in his arms with a fierce grip that threatened to crush him. His embrace was so tight that Kwon Taekjoo couldn't move at all. Zhenya's arms wrapped around his waist like steel straps as he silently buried his face in Kwon Taekjoo's shoulder, clinging to him with the desperation of a child holding on to their most cherished stuffed toy.

"I won't let you go," Zhenya muttered stubbornly, wrapping Kwon Taekjoo in a suffocating embrace.

A deep sense of helplessness overtook Kwon Taekjoo as he realized there was no way to convince Zhenya to release him, no matter what he said.

"Damn it, please, Yevgeny!"

The words came out as a desperate plea, almost a whisper, his voice filled with frustration and anger. Zhenya must have been surprised by his reaction, as Kwon Taekjoo could feel him tremble. The grip of Zhenya's arms around him began to loosen. Kwon Taekjoo let out another deep sigh and threw another sharp comment at Zhenya.

"I don't want to hate you again! You should know that by now."

Zhenya took a silent breath, his hands fidgeting over Kwon Taekjoo, unsure of what to do. Even that small gesture of hesitation fueled Kwon Taekjoo's frustration. How much longer would he have to teach him such simple things? A deep fatigue started to take over him.

"... If we stay together, we'll just keep fighting, so let me go," Kwon Taekjoo said, utterly exhausted.

The sound of Zhenya grinding his teeth echoed in his ears, followed by the slow, reluctant release of his grip. His arms trembled as they opened, as if it took all his strength to let go.

Uncomfortable with the scene, Kwon Taekjoo averted his eyes and stared at the emptiness. Once his body was freed, he shoved Zhenya's arm aside and headed upstairs. Zhenya didn't follow, but a crash and the sound of things breaking echoed behind him. Zhenya seemed to be tearing the house apart, unable to contain his anger.

Yet Kwon Taekjoo didn't hesitate for a second. The noise only made him move faster. He knew that if he wavered for even a moment, he would crumble.

When he burst through the rooftop door, he found Zhenya's helicopter. One of the landing skids had been ripped off, and the helicopter's fuselage was peppered with bullet marks. The damage was more than enough to show what Zhenya had been through to bring him from Vladivostok to this place.

"....."

With his lips pressed into a hard line, Kwon Taekjoo started the helicopter's engine. Right now, his top priority was getting back to Korea. He needed to resolve the mission he had left unfinished, as well as the scandal Zhenya had caused. The NIS had probably already uncovered Zhenya's involvement and might have even issued an arrest warrant against him. It was also likely that Russia wouldn't ignore what had happened this time. In any case, the best thing for Zhenya was to stay here. Beyond that, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't afford to think about anything else. Time was running out.

The slow rotation of the helicopter's blades sped up, filling the air with a deafening roar. The wind kicked up dirt and leaves, causing the nearby trees to sway violently. Despite everything, Zhenya didn't follow him up to the rooftop. Kwon Taekjoo couldn't even see his shadow through the lower windows. Was Zhenya really letting him go so easily? Or was his silence a sign of how furious he was? Kwon Taekjoo kept glancing anxiously downward, feeling an odd and unsettling sense of freedom.

Little by little, the helicopter moved away from Zhenya's residence. As he gained altitude, Kwon Taekjoo spotted debris scattered across the island. He even saw the wreckage of a helicopter that had crashed into a deep crevice.

The acrid smell of burnt metal that clung to Zhenya's body flashed through his mind. Just as he had suspected, Zhenya must have been caught in a fight while getting him to safety. The Russian government had probably sent helicopters to chase him. They might have even issued orders to eliminate him.

Kwon Taekjoo felt a deep sorrow in his heart, knowing he was leaving Zhenya behind at such a moment. But at the same time, he knew Zhenya would be safer if he wasn't by his side. At the very least, Zhenya would be free from accusations of harboring a spy. From an outsider's perspective, it might even seem like Kwon Taekjoo had blackmailed Zhenya into giving him the helicopter to escape, meaning Zhenya could clear himself of any suspicion of being secretly allied with Kwon Taekjoo. Their alliance had always been something others should view as a misunderstanding. In fact, their relationship had been that way from the very beginning.

Kwon Taekjoo clenched his fist on the control stick and gritted his teeth. Everything he feared had unraveled all at once. He didn't even know where to begin untangling the mess. But as he gazed out at the horizon, his eyes filled with determination.

He would find a way to fix everything on his own, no matter what it took.

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Chapter End Notes

Support the author by purchasing the novel on Ridibooks.

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Sad days ahead, everyone.

Cease Fire

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•SPANISH DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Under the cover of darkness, Kwon Taekjoo arrived at the border trifecta where Russia, China, and Kazakhstan meet. This area was frequented not only by European travelers but also by Chinese ones, allowing him to move freely even without a disguise.

Like most espionage agencies, the NIS maintained a covert communications base for foreign missions since using embassies or consulates for that function risked diplomatic complications. These secret bases provided agents with weapons, funding, shelter, and transport when they were temporarily cut off from official channels.

Kwon Taekjoo contacted the base in Kazakhstan, where he received a temporary passport and the resources needed for his escape. He stayed in China for a while, waiting for the right moment to return home. In total, it took him ten days to travel from Ajinoki Island to South Korea.

When he arrived by sea at the port of Incheon, an NIS vehicle was waiting for him. However, the number of guards caught his attention. There were around fifteen, all armed. It felt more like they were there to transport a prisoner than to receive an agent.

"Good job, sir. We'll escort you back to the NIS."

One of them opened the rear door for Kwon Taekjoo, while another stood on the opposite side, holding the door open and watching him closely. There was no doubt that he would have to sit between them for the entire ride to NIS headquarters.

Without a word, Kwon Taekjoo got into the vehicle. He was too physically and mentally exhausted to resist.

“We’ve secured G1. Time: 23:40. Heading back to headquarters.”

After reporting over the radio, they set off. A deathly silence filled the car for the entire trip. Kwon Taekjoo closed his eyes, trying to catch some brief rest while he could.

The NIS headquarters was brightly lit despite the late hour. Kwon Taekjoo wondered if another lecture awaited him in the director’s office. In truth, given the circumstances, they might even call him into the deputy director’s office.

Surrounded by guards, he entered the elevator, assuming they’d go up to the second floor. But the doors closed, and the elevator began to descend. Below ground were windowless interrogation rooms and confinement facilities reserved for those under investigation.

“Where are we going?” Kwon Taekjoo asked as soon as the elevator stopped. The doors opened, revealing a dark and foreboding hallway.

“This way.”

The guards led him to a nearby interrogation room. A disbelieving laugh escaped Kwon Taekjoo’s lips. Was this how they treated agents who failed their missions? Thrown into a damp basement upon arrival, interrogated about why the operation failed, whether they were to blame, and if they had collaborated with external sources? This had never happened to him before, so he couldn’t know if it was standard procedure or something reserved just for him.

Still, considering that the Vladivostok mission had been a failure, the NIS had reasons to be suspicious. Kwon Taekjoo had to prove his innocence and explain Zhenya’s interference, no matter what. That’s why he had left Zhenya behind and come alone.

He entered the room voluntarily. If the hallway had seemed damp and oppressive, the interrogation room was even worse in intensity.

Kwon Taekjoo cautiously scanned the room. As he approached the chair in front of him, the same guard from earlier stepped forward to stop him.

“Excuse me, but we need to do a search.”

“…Go ahead.”

Kwon Taekjoo obediently placed his hands against the back wall while the guard thoroughly searched him from head to toe, removing his gun from its holster and handing it to another guard. Then, he checked his socks and even rolled up Kwon Taekjoo’s pant leg to extract a knife from its sheath.

And that wasn’t all. Even though the guard had finished searching his body, Kwon Taekjoo sensed an odd hesitation in him. He glanced over his shoulder to look at the guard.

“What is it? Do you want me to strip?”

“…No, that won’t be necessary. Please wait here for a minute.”

Quickly, the guard turned to leave, but stopped and said, “Oh,” as if he had just remembered something. “By the way, are you hungry?”

“Why? Are you going to offer me some ox bone soup?”

“If you’d like.”

“Wow. How long do you plan to keep me locked up here?”

“…Would you prefer something to drink?”

“Bring me an espresso. American style.”

“Of course. We’ll get that for you.”

The guard closed the door quietly behind him, followed by the unmistakable click of a lock. Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t understand why they were being so cautious when he had made it clear that he had no intention of resisting.

He sank heavily into the chair and leaned his head back. A long sigh escaped him as he stared blankly at the ceiling, lost in thought.

What was Zhenya doing now? Was he still on Ajinoki Island? Kwon Taekjoo worried that the Russian government might have already sent troops to capture him. Maybe leaving him behind had been a mistake. These thoughts tormented him until he finally shook his head. If they had escaped together, getting into Korea would have been even more complicated. And it wasn’t like they could keep running without resolving the issue at hand. Right now, there was no safer place for Zhenya than Ajinoki Island. Meanwhile, he would be treated like a criminal here until they figured out why the Vladivostok operation failed.

Anyway, nothing good would come from them staying together. Sticking together would only lead to more fights. The right thing to do was to stay out of sight until the situation calmed down. But Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t shake the image of Zhenya’s face from his mind. He had looked completely betrayed and hurt. Kwon Taekjoo had lashed out at him, unable to control his overwhelming anger, but now he wondered if he should have just explained things calmly. Frustrated, he ran his hands through his hair.

At that precise moment, a muffled noise came from behind the door, followed by the faint aroma of coffee. The door soon opened, and Director Kwak stepped in.

“Sir.”

“Ah, no need to stand.”

Kwon Taekjoo was about to rise to greet him, but Director Kwak gestured for him to stay seated. Instead, he nodded briefly in greeting.

“It’s been a while.”

“Yes. I see you made it back safely.”

The director placed a cup of coffee in front of Kwon Taekjoo and sat down across from him. Kwon Taekjoo stared at the coffee. A thin film floated on the surface.

“What’s wrong? Afraid I spiked it?”

Director Kwak gave him a broad smile, noticing Kwon Taekjoo’s hesitation. Given the circumstances, it wouldn’t have been surprising if a truth serum had been added.

“There’s no way I would’ve done that.”

“Right, no way,” Director Kwak repeated lightly, a mocking tone in his voice. Yet his words carried a deeper meaning. He seemed to be asking Kwon Taekjoo if it really was “impossible” that he had done something to warrant such suspicions.

Kwon Taekjoo chuckled silently and took a sip, carefully watching Director Kwak’s expression. Judging by his sunken eyes, he seemed incredibly tired. Not only had the joint operation between Korea, Japan, and the U.S. failed, but his own presence had been exposed to the enemy, likely trapping him in a vicious cycle of blame.

Successful operations were never made public, and no agent was ever rewarded or recognized for their efforts. Only failures were brought to light. When a mission was exposed, it led to severe diplomatic consequences, and someone had to take the fall. In such cases, the government would deny any involvement, charging the agents with espionage and punishing them accordingly. There was a reason covert agents were treated as the disposable hunting dogs of the government.

Kwon Taekjoo had already reported most of what had happened in Vladivostok when he contacted the NIS through the communications base in Kazakhstan. But he knew it wouldn’t be enough to clear his name.

As expected, Director Kwak began his questioning.

“So, where have you been all this time?”

“On a remote Russian island.”

“A remote island... You fled there alone? After abandoning your hideout?”

Agents could never leave evidence on the ground. They had to destroy every trace of the operation, even if it meant sacrificing themselves. There were no exceptions to this rule, not even in the most extreme conditions. This was the first time Kwon Taekjoo had failed in this regard.

“I was ambushed. When I came to, I was already on the island.”

“…Ambushed?”

Kwon Taekjoo’s answer must have been unexpected because Director Kwak raised an eyebrow, frowning. That someone could be strong enough to take down one of his best agents seemed doubtful.

“An ambush, huh...” he murmured before suddenly asking, “Don’t tell me it was that ‘Psych’ again?”

Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t respond right away. He had prepared himself to explain Zhenya’s involvement in the operation, but he hadn’t expected Director Kwak to call on him first. Director Kwak let out a small chuckle, as if wondering why Kwon Taekjoo was so surprised.

“I’ve heard that’s what Russians call their ambassador. Answer me. Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov... did he show up in Vladivostok?”

“Yes.”

“Then he’s involved in the plot between Russia and North Korea, correct?”

“No, that’s not true.”

“It’s not? The Bogdanov family has been key in the current conspiracy between Russia and North Korea. You can’t deny that. But now you’re telling me their youngest son wasn’t involved? How can you be so sure? He left his post without authorization and personally interfered with our mission. If he wasn’t aware, as you claim, how did he know exactly when and where to show up? And why would he attack you while you were on duty?”

“I think he believed he was rescuing me.”

Director Kwak tilted his head. A Russian diplomat had disrupted an international mission to "rescue" his Korean friend, fully aware it would spark a diplomatic incident? It made no sense, especially considering Zhenya’s actions went against his family’s interests. But as far-fetched as it sounded, Kwon Taekjoo was determined to defend Zhenya’s innocence, even if he had to explain it over and over again.

“I don’t know how the ambassador discovered the plot between Russia and North Korea either. As you probably know, he’s considered a nuisance even in his own country. I wouldn’t be surprised if he hacked his government’s security systems.”

“Even so, it doesn’t change the fact that a member of the Bogdanov family directly interfered with our mission.”

“I believe he thought the situation called for immediate action. He didn’t have time to consider his family ties or the possible consequences.”

“So, you’re saying this was the only way he could protect both you and his family?”

“No. He feels no loyalty to his country, and he’s never cared about his family’s reputation. He’s betrayed them countless times for his own amusement or gain. That’s why I’m still alive.”

Director Kwak rubbed his forehead and tilted his head again.

“Russia appointed someone like him as an ambassador?”

“He’d only be a threat to them up close, so sending him to Korea was their way of getting rid of him. You could say they abandoned him here.”

“Still, it’s hard to believe. What could he possibly gain from interfering with our operation?”

Kwon Taekjoo knew his story would lack credibility as long as he kept his relationship with Zhenya a secret. Leaving aside Zhenya’s pure affection and concern for him, the situation seemed unexplainable.

“What I know for sure is that he found out about the Russia-North Korea matter, and as soon as he did, he came to save me. That’s what he told me.”

“Look, I want to trust you, but do you realize how outrageous that sounds? I warned you before the mission not to let personal matters interfere with our work.”

“... That was my mistake.”

Kwon Taekjoo had no excuse left. He knew that as long as Zhenya kept getting involved, accusations like these were inevitable. He also knew the NIS had been watching Zhenya for a while. And yet, he hadn’t been able to prevent this disaster.

“Alright, everything will be cleared up once the investigation is over. If necessary, we can always bring the ambassador in for questioning.”

“That would only cause more diplomatic trouble. That bastard is still a diplomat, after all.”

“That’s a different story if that diplomat committed espionage on Korean soil.”

“What we did isn’t much different from Russia’s perspective. Considering our intentions going in, it would only look like we’re playing the victim.”

Director Kwak let out a bitter laugh. “Do you realize how dangerous your words were just now?”

“I’m just saying we shouldn’t complicate things further when we should be quietly covering our tracks. Accusations won’t resolve the situation.”

“I understand, but generally, when things go wrong, we start by figuring out who acted properly or not.” Director Kwak lowered his eyelids and shrugged.

If this continued, Kwon Taekjoo wouldn’t be able to shake off accusations of colluding with the enemy. It was becoming harder to undo the charges against Zhenya. If it were up to him, he’d have requested a polygraph, but as an agent with years of psychological training, the results would be meaningless. He had only one option left.

“I’ll share the confidential information the ambassador obtained from Russia.”

“Oh?”

“We didn’t manage to find out what Russia and North Korea were negotiating because the mission failed. And that was the goal of the mission, wasn’t it?”

Director Kwak rubbed his chin, deep in thought. It was a tempting offer, considering that valuable intelligence would fall right into his hands.

“Alright. I’ll hear you out for now.”

“Park Jeong-ho seems to have discovered a new toxin or virus of natural origin. According to reports, its toxicity is comparable to ricin, Novichok, VX, and polonium-210. Even the slightest contact is deadly, so it was sealed airtight during transport. With the state pharmaceutical company Pharmzaschita involved, it’s likely they intended to turn it into a new chemical weapon.”

“If that’s true, the situation is about to get much more complicated than we initially thought,” Director Kwak said after listening quietly.

He massaged his temple and then leaned back in his chair, his eyes fixed on Kwon Taekjoo. The tension in the interrogation room seemed to ease a bit.

“I believe most of what you’ve said is true. If you were lying, you wouldn’t have come back knowing the accusations you’d face. Plus, I’m aware of how close you are to Ambassador Bogdanov. More than anything, I can see the frustration in your eyes, as if someone stole your prey. But…” he paused, drawing a line, “that’s just my opinion. If you want to prove your innocence, you’ll need a more solid argument. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And keep in mind, you weren’t completely innocent here, so you won’t escape disciplinary measures.”

“I’m aware.”

“Also, just in case you’re curious, the U.S. agent you pushed out during the operation approached a cargo vehicle on his own. He was found dead shortly after a confrontation with the enemy. As for the Japanese agent stationed at Far Eastern Federal University, he was arrested on the spot and has been missing ever since.”

After reporting on the status of Foxtrot and Sierra, Director Kwak pushed a tablet toward the table. When Kwon Taekjoo turned on the screen, a blurry image appeared showing Asian police recovering a body from the water.

“Is this…?”

“They found an Asian man’s body in Lake Uvs Nuur, near the Mongolia-Russia border. It was already quite decomposed, so it’s hard to identify.”

“Is it Sierra?”

“That’s our provisional conclusion. His height, blood type, and physical traits match the Japanese agent.”

“Have they determined the cause of death?”

“Not yet. From what I’ve heard, the body wasn’t disfigured, and there were no obvious signs of foul play. It’ll most likely be ruled a natural death, either from illness or drowning. I’m sure the Japanese government would also prefer it to be quietly hidden away.”

The death of an agent was always handled the same way, no matter the country. Agents served their nations, but their nations couldn’t protect them. It was a harsh reality, but one all espionage agents had to accept.

“And Park Jeong-ho?”

“He’s back in North Korea. With the North Korea-Russia conference exposed, they’ll be keeping a low profile for a while. In a way, it’s an opportunity for us. While they’re lying low, we can work on identifying the toxin you mentioned. Park Jeong-ho sent us a distress signal, so we might try to make contact with him. But until we know exactly what kind of toxin it is, our hands are tied.”

Director Kwak finished his update at that point and stood up. Kwon Taekjoo’s gaze followed him closely.

“This place might be uncomfortable, but try to rest in the meantime. It seems like you haven’t slept in days.”

“You don’t look much better yourself, sir.”

Director Kwak laughed at Kwon Taekjoo’s bold reply. “Taekjoo,” he called, his tone softer than usual. “Despite everything, I’m glad you came back in one piece.”

“…..”

“If you’re feeling guilty about the failed mission or being the only survivor, let it go. Some things in this world are beyond your control, no matter how hard you try. When there’s a chance to survive, take it, no matter what. That way, you can come back and face the consequences. I know I’m not in a position to say this, but an ‘honorable death’? That’s a myth. You’re someone’s son, friend, colleague, and a citizen of this country. No one’s eager to rush into death for some greater good. And I don’t want to lose my agents to such a meaningless end.”

Kwon Taekjoo clenched his jaw. Director Kwak’s eyes shifted to Kwon Taekjoo’s tightly clenched fist.

“Anyway, are you sure you don’t need treatment for that wrist?”

It was then that Kwon Taekjoo looked down at his arm. A purple bruise marked his right wrist, twisted during his fight with Zhenya. He had received some temporary treatment in

Kazakhstan, but the throbbing pain had lingered for several days. He suspected it might be a small fracture.

“I’m fine.”

“Fine, really? If you ignore a minor injury, it’ll only worsen beneath the surface. I’ll send a medical team. From now on, the interrogations will just be formalities, so you won’t have to suffer too much.”

Director Kwak gave Kwon Taekjoo’s shoulder a firm squeeze before leaving the interrogation room. As usual, the door shut firmly behind him.

Kwon Taekjoo slumped in his seat, staring blankly at the wall. The events of the last few days seemed to have happened ages ago. His mind was congested, a chaotic mix of worries. He rubbed his face with both hands and let out a deep sigh.

Failure.

Escape.

Zhenya.

Kwon Taekjoo was overwhelmed by the harsh reality he now faced, one he never imagined would come crashing into his life.

The night would be too, too long.

The air around Kwon Taekjoo was thick with black smoke. No matter how much he waved his arms in front of him, the darkness only closed in tighter, making it harder for him to see the path ahead. The bitter smoke stung his throat and seeped into his lungs.

He shook off the darkness threatening to swallow him and kept moving forward, one step at a time. Every step was a struggle, as if he were trudging through a swamp.

Soon, his vision began to clear slowly, and he saw a child sitting alone. The boy’s light hair, round face, and pale skin were enough for Kwon Taekjoo to recognize who he was... and to understand that he was trapped in another cursed dream.

‘Zhenya,’ he tried to shout, but his throat was blocked, preventing any sound from escaping. The thick smoke burned his lungs as it poured in through his open mouth. The darkness he had swallowed in that moment of weakness blackened his insides and spread through his limbs.

Kwon Taekjoo writhed in pain when suddenly the sky burst with a torrent of light. Countless glowing shapes were plummeting toward the Earth. Were they meteorites? An eerie, unsettling feeling told him they weren’t. As he strained to identify the source of his unease, the luminous bodies tore through the sky and crashed into the ground with explosive force, splitting the earth into massive cracks.

Kwon Taekjoo frantically turned toward the boy. He was still sitting where he had been, looking at Kwon Taekjoo with indifference. But for some reason, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't make out his features clearly, much less the expression on his face.

'Taekjoo. Are you going to abandon me again?'

Strangely, the boy's cold voice rang loud and clear in his ears. At the same time, the projectiles were tearing apart the ground around them, completely obliterating their surroundings. Kwon Taekjoo tried to call out the boy's name with all his strength, but no sound came from his mouth. He couldn't even move, his legs rooted to the ground.

Kwon Taekjoo struggled, trying to run toward the boy, but every effort only seemed to increase the distance between them. The boy kept drifting farther away, against his will.

Again.

The boy's bitter accusation pierced Kwon Taekjoo's heart just as a blinding white light shot down toward the earth. The explosion it caused sent Kwon Taekjoo flying. When he finally forced his tightly shut eyes open, he saw the child's silhouette engulfed in flames, writhing in agony, before disappearing completely without a trace.

Kwon Taekjoo's eyes snapped open. Before fully regaining his senses, he frantically scanned his surroundings, but the dark gray walls of the room were all that greeted him.

Thud, thud, thud. His heart pounded erratically, making him curse under his breath. He brought the back of his hand to his mouth, trying to steady his uneven breathing. As his head cleared, his senses sharpened.

Had he fallen asleep without realizing it? Kwon Taekjoo leaned back in his seat. When he wiped his face, his palm came away drenched in cold sweat.

Even though he had understood it was a dream while it was happening, he couldn't regain his composure. Not even now, fully awake, could he calm himself like he usually would. He clenched his trembling hands into fists.

"Ah, damn it…"

Nightmares starring a young Zhenya had become all too common, so he should've been used to them by now. After all, a dream was just a dream, and nothing like that had ever happened in real life. So why was his heart pounding so hard?

Had something happened to Zhenya?

Kwon Taekjoo's anxiety grew as the worry gnawed at him, unable to check on Zhenya. He couldn't ask about Zhenya's situation either, not while he was still under suspicion of conspiring with him.

How much longer would he be held here? How much time had already passed? His senses seemed to dull with each agonizing minute, yet the thorn of anxiety inside him only

sharpened.

‘Taekjoo. Are you going to abandon me again?’

The bitter accusation from his nightmare echoed endlessly in his mind.

“You can’t leave me behind like that again, Taekjoo.”

Zhenya’s final words before Kwon Taekjoo left Ajinoki Island flashed through his thoughts. In the past, Zhenya would have used force to keep him there. But this time, he hadn’t. What had stopped him? What was he so afraid of?

‘You’re always trying to control me like this. You sweet-talk me, praise me when it suits you, and then come back and threaten me when things don’t go your way.’

How long had Zhenya been harboring those fears?

The truth was, Kwon Taekjoo had always known, but he had convinced himself there was nothing he could do about it. Zhenya had always shown him affection, yet all Kwon Taekjoo did was beg for his attention, comforting himself with the promise that Zhenya would chase after him wherever he went... only to willfully ignore Zhenya’s constant loneliness.

The more he thought about it, the heavier the guilt weighed on him. Kwon Taekjoo knew he needed to stay cold and focused on the government’s affairs, but he couldn’t stop worrying about Zhenya, who he often left entirely on his own. Even though Zhenya was an adult, Kwon Taekjoo often found himself wondering if he was eating properly. He let out a long sigh and scratched his head.

Suddenly, a knock echoed through the room. Kwon Taekjoo had been so absorbed in his thoughts that he hadn’t noticed someone approaching. Moments later, the door opened, and Yoon Jongwoo peeked his head in.

“Sunbae!”

“Why bother knocking if you’re going to open the door anyway?”

“Are you okay? Did you get hurt anywhere?”

Yoon Jongwoo continued to scan Kwon Taekjoo anxiously, unfazed by his sarcastic comment. He narrowed his eyes and inspected every part of his body. After a moment, he let out a sigh of relief.

“Phew, I’m so glad you’re okay. I heard you’d been stuck here for two days, so I was really worried they might’ve done something to you.”

“Something to me? Like what?”

“You know, like forcing the truth out of you, beating you, torturing you…”

“You watch too many movies,” Kwon Taekjoo muttered as he warily eyed the security cameras around the room. “Are you even allowed to be in here?”

“Ah, the director sent me to let you go. He says you should take it easy and rest at home until they call you again."

“Any other instructions?”

“No. As long as you don’t leave the country, you’re free to do whatever you want. Isn’t that great news?”

Despite Yoon Jongwoo’s pleasant delivery, in the end, it meant that Kwon Taekjoo had been slapped with a travel ban. Sure, he was free to do whatever he wanted, but only within the confines of his daily routine. He was practically imprisoned in the country until they decided what to do with him.

“What are you thinking about? You should hurry home. Your mother must be really worried.”

“She’s in Canada right now.”

Kwon Taekjoo gave a brief explanation about his mother’s whereabouts and then stood up from his seat. After two days in a stiff chair, every cell in his body screamed in pain. If possible, he wanted to go to a *banya* and let the steam relieve his discomfort.

Yoon Jongwoo trailed behind him as he left the interrogation room, sneaking furtive glances at him. It was obvious he had something to say.

“What?”

“Huh?”

“You seem restless, like you’ve got something to say. What is it?”

“…I, uh, just wanted to say... cheer up.”

“Out of nowhere?”

“I figured you’d be upset about how things turned out. After all, you’re a perfectionist.”

Was he trying to console him about the failed operation?

Kwon Taekjoo did have a habit of finishing what he started, no matter the cost. He hated leaving things unfinished, especially if it left a bitter taste in his mouth. Wrapping things up carelessly always led to regret, and there was nothing more foolish than living in remorse over the past.

That’s why he preferred missions he knew he could carry out and always tried to execute them perfectly. If he wasn’t sure he could succeed, he wouldn’t even attempt them, as it would only tarnish his satisfaction in completing 100% of his assigned missions. He approached relationships with others in much the same way.

Maybe that's why he felt so uneasy accepting the Russian operation at his superiors' request, especially after running into Zhenya during the mission. At the time, he had thought it was just a bad day and that nothing would really change because of it.

But after being caught in the true whirlwind that was Zhenya, with no way to escape, the convictions Kwon Taekjoo had clung to began to crumble. He found himself distracted at work, unable to prevent Zhenya from getting involved in government affairs. A part of him, in fact, secretly felt relieved whenever Zhenya showed up and prioritized Kwon Taekjoo's safety over his own nation's. It was entirely unlike him. His work and personal life were falling apart, and nothing seemed to go right. His feelings seemed to be sinking into an endless abyss.

"To be honest, you didn't have many alternatives in this operation. All our plans collapsed because that U.S. agent went rogue. It's not your fault, *sunbae*."

"I can't say I'm completely blameless either."

After all, he had willingly let Zhenya into his life, fully aware of his background, his connections, and his bad temper. No one had forced him. He had known from the start that danger would become a frequent part of his life in the near future. Zhenya was the only unpredictable factor, the sole exception, and the one risk Kwon Taekjoo had invited into his life willingly.

Kwon Taekjoo halted, standing still in deep thought. Yoon Jongwoo watched him and let out an awkward laugh, trying to lighten the mood with a forced, cheerful voice.

"You know what? How about we go grab a drink? It's been a while. My treat."

Was the stingiest person Kwon Taekjoo knew offering to buy him drinks? He must've looked seriously depressed. Kwon Taekjoo chuckled softly, turning down the rare offer.

"I'm tired. I just want to go home and rest."

"Aw, come on, don't be so pessimistic. You should try to lift your spirits, especially at a time like this. Plus, you said your mom isn't home right now, so there's no one waiting to bother you there. And if I let you go now, you'll probably pass out without even eating."

"Sleep is exactly what I need right now."

"But I'm too worried to just let you go!"

"Worried about what?"

"About everything going on right now. Mr. Yevgeny won't be able to return for a while either…"

"…How do you know that?" Kwon Taekjoo asked abruptly. Yoon Jongwoo faltered, caught off guard, then hesitated before confessing the truth.

"The director asked me to keep tabs on Mr. Yevgeny."

“Why him?”

“Because he interfered in our operation again. I don’t think they’ve informed the executive board yet, but now that the mission has failed, this could turn into a very serious issue. I mean, two agents were found dead, and you disappeared… If the U.S. or Japan find out you made it back alive, they’ll want answers, like how you managed to escape on your own. It wouldn’t take much for them to assume you were secretly working with Mr. Yevgeny. If we want to prove his actions weren’t connected to us, it’s best you don’t contact him for the time being. It’s the only way to clear your name too. Since the director personally asked me to keep an eye on Mr. Yevgeny, I think he’s trying to give you the benefit of the doubt,” Yoon Jongwoo explained, nervously watching Kwon Taekjoo as he carefully navigated the topic.

In his roundabout way, Yoon Jongwoo was subtly telling him to cut off all contact with Zhenya. They had practically issued an unofficial order against him. The whole thing was ridiculous. It wasn’t like they were Romeo and Juliet.

In any case, this meant that Zhenya wouldn’t be able to return to Korea in the near future, and Kwon Taekjoo wouldn’t be able to go see him either. For now, he had to refrain from establishing any kind of contact with him. It was likely that the Russian government and the Bogdanov family weren’t looking too kindly on Zhenya at the moment. After all, Kwon Taekjoo had left him stranded on that remote island, with no one else to rely on. All Zhenya’s talk about fixing things on his own had amounted to nothing, especially since he didn’t have the power to do anything about it.

“I don’t want to hate you again! You should know that by now.”

Zhenya’s hesitant, trembling fingers as he finally let go of Kwon Taekjoo were still vivid in his mind. It was as if Zhenya was forcing himself to do something he didn’t want to—something that seemed practically impossible. And all because, if he didn’t, Kwon Taekjoo might hate him again, shattering the fragile bond they had just managed to piece back together.

In the midst of all that, Kwon Taekjoo had used Zhenya’s anxiety against him. Under the guise of helping, he had dismissed and criticized Zhenya’s actions when all he had been trying to do was what he thought was best for him.

“Damn it…”

A crushing weight settled on Kwon Taekjoo’s chest, and a suffocating sense of helplessness washed over him. He had no idea where to even begin fixing the mess they were in. A feeling of powerlessness took hold of his entire being.

Kwon Taekjoo stayed holed up at home for days. He still hadn’t heard anything from headquarters, and he couldn’t dare try to contact Zhenya knowing that he was being watched.

Without bothering to shower or eat properly, he sprawled out on the couch, drifting in and out of increasingly deeper sleep as the days blurred together. The few times he did wake up, he’d sit there, thinking endlessly until his dizzy head throbbed in pain, only to come to no

conclusions and circle right back to the beginning. Another unproductive day passed, his mind numb from the relentless and unchanging loop.

When he couldn't sleep any longer, he forced his body to get up. He'd rested to the point of exhaustion, yet his body still felt heavy and sluggish, as if he had turned into a rusty machine in just a few days.

"..."

He sat there, dazed and unmoving, before suddenly scanning the room for his phone. At some point, it had ended up on the floor. The battery had long since died. Kwon Taekjoo lazily searched for the charger, plugged it in, and turned the phone on. The battery was completely drained, so the screen flickered once before shutting off again. Still, he persisted.

After three minutes, the screen came back to life. The first thing Kwon Taekjoo checked was his missed calls. The only names that stood out were his mother and Yoon Jongwoo. He scrolled through the list, up and down, for a while, but Zhenya's name was missing. There wasn't even an unknown number that could have been him. Of course, Zhenya had never been one to call often, and it was better if they didn't contact each other right now anyway. Still, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't help but feel a simmering frustration, even knowing that.

If he'd known this would happen, he would've planted a bug on Zhenya too. At least that way, he wouldn't have to wonder what Zhenya was doing or if he was safe.

As these thoughts swirled in his mind, he called his mother. The ringing barely lasted a second before her anxious voice came through.

["Is that you, Taekjoo? Why haven't you been answering?"]

"Oh... my phone died. I forgot to charge it."

["What? Your phone's been off for an entire day. You're only just noticing?"]

"I actually lost my phone. I found it today."

["Oh my goodness, Taekjoo. Sometimes you seem so clever, but then you go and do things like this."]

She must have been beside herself because she didn't stop scolding him.

["Do you have any idea how worried I was when I couldn't even reach the ambassador? I was wondering if there'd been an accident or if something had happened at the embassy. I was ready to catch a flight home tomorrow if I didn't hear from either of you."]

"Come on, Mom. I'm a grown man, getting older by the minute. Why are you so worried? At Auntie's house, they'd scold you for worrying like this. You know what they say: no news is good news."

["Taekjoo, are you seriously saying that after scaring me half to death?"]

“Well, now you’ve reached me, so everything’s fine. How’s Auntie? Did she already have her surgery? How’s the weather over there? Are you enjoying the food? Is anything bothering you?” Kwon Taekjoo asked, calmly changing the subject.

His mother listened in silence before speaking again, her tone now softer. “Taekjoo...” The forced laughter had disappeared from her voice.

["You're not hurt or sick anywhere, are you?"]

"No. I promise."

["And nothing’s happened to you?"]

"No. Nothing at all."

["Then why does your voice sound so down?"]

"Ahem, ahem. Maybe it’s just because I slept too much. I actually managed to rest all night for once," Kwon Taekjoo reassured her, even clearing his throat to sound convincing. A soft sigh escaped her.

["I see. You've always managed your troubles well, so I’ll trust you, okay?"]

"Aww, don’t get all sentimental with me again. Don’t worry—your son is eating well and doing fine. But you should take care of yourself. Don’t skip meals or lose sleep over Auntie."

["Understood. Just make sure you answer your calls, you rascal. Don’t make me worry, alright?"]

"Come on, it was just 10 seconds ago you said you’d trust me. I’m hanging up now."

["Alright. Talk to you later."]

Kwon Taekjoo finally ended the call after his mom's usual request to keep in touch. A sigh escaped him. How much longer could he keep this up? Ever since he got involved with the NIS, his lies had only grown, along with the empty promises to loved ones he couldn’t even protect.

“.....”

Kwon Taekjoo checked his missed calls again. As usual, Zhenya’s name was nowhere to be found. He had blown up at him, so it was no surprise there’d been no contact. Though Zhenya had always been soft with him, he still had his own pride. He was probably hurt and angry.

It had been Kwon Taekjoo who suggested they keep their distance. For most couples, that was a sign of a breakup, often said right before things ended for good. While Kwon Taekjoo had spoken in the heat of the moment, even he knew he’d gone too far. True, he couldn’t stand to look at Zhenya back then, but that didn’t mean he wanted to lose him forever.

It made sense that Zhenya wouldn't answer his calls. But now, he wasn't even picking up his mom's? In the past, no matter how tense things got between them, Zhenya had always kept up a good relationship with her.

They'd fought over some silly thing once before. Kwon Taekjoo had let his anger get the best of him, had a few drinks, and then snuck over to Zhenya's place to make amends. But Zhenya wasn't there. Kwon Taekjoo called him right away, but he didn't pick up—clearly still mad. Kwon kept calling and texting while waiting for him, but as the night wore on, Zhenya didn't come home. When Kwon finally gave up and went back to his own place, he found Zhenya there, casually sipping wine with his mom, his fingers gliding smoothly as he ignored Kwon's calls right in front of him. Kwon Taekjoo had been left speechless when his mom sided with Zhenya, lecturing him and asking what he'd done to make him so upset.

Was Zhenya so wrapped up in his feelings now that he was ignoring his mom's calls, too? Or was he in some situation where he couldn't reach anyone?

No, he's the last person I should be worrying about, he thought.

Zhenya wasn't the type to be easily caught if someone was after him. Even though Kwon Taekjoo tried to shrug off his worries, he couldn't calm his nerves.

"...Oh."

Suddenly, he thought of a way to check on Zhenya. He quickly put his plan into action, scrolling through his contacts to make a call. After a few rings, the line connected.

["Taekjoo?"]

A skeptical voice came through his phone. It was Olga.

"Yeah, it's me."

["Why are you calling me? Is something wrong?"]

Her questioning tone held a mix of surprise and humor. Kwon Taekjoo rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably.

"I... uh... I was wondering if you'd seen Zhenya lately. Or if you'd heard anything from him."

["Huh? Hmm, I'm not sure. I mean, I barely see him once a year."]

"...Really?"

["Did you two fight again?"]

Olga's unexpected question hit a nerve. Kwon Taekjoo didn't answer right away, but his silence seemed to confirm her suspicions because she murmured, "Hmm…" and guessed his intentions.

["If you're asking if he's gone back home, he hasn't. The mood at home is pretty bleak. Is it because of you again? What did he do this time?"]

"You don't need to know that."

["Aaaah, really? Then there's no reason for you to be calling me, is there?"], she replied sarcastically.

As always, like father, like daughter, she wasn't about to help him without getting something in return. Kwon Taekjoo knew he'd have to explain more to get anything from her.

"It's related to my work, so I can't go into details. Otherwise, I'd be compromising national security. Besides, knowing would do you no good. Honestly, it'd be a relief if I didn't put you in danger."

["But you've already involved me."]

"All I did was ask if you knew how your brother was doing. What's suspicious about that?"

["It might not be suspicious for most siblings, but with us, it is."]

Just as Olga said, the situation with the Bogdanov family was different. She probably wasn't exaggerating when she mentioned she only saw him once a year.

["If he managed to make our father and brothers angry, doesn't that mean good news for you, Taekjoo?"]

"What are you talking about?"

["He always seemed to get into arguments with my family because of you, Taekjoo. They'd tell him not to meddle in foreign matters, warn him he could cause diplomatic conflicts, threaten to remove him from his ambassador role, and say they wouldn't protect him anymore... Wasn't all that because he was actively getting involved in your missions?"]

"....."

["Do you know what he told them every time?"]

"...No."

["He'd ask our father and brothers if they still wanted to know what Anastasia was like and then dared them to go ahead and do whatever they wanted. He told them if they did, he'd make sure they could meet Anastasia up close."]

Kwon Taekjoo put his hand to his face as a headache began to throb at the back of his skull. He'd always known Zhenya had a rocky relationship with his family and that he'd repeatedly betrayed them and his country by interfering in Kwon's missions. But he hadn't expected Zhenya to strike back with an even bigger threat.

“Anyway, things have gotten a bit complicated, so I can’t track him right now, and we can’t contact each other. It’s hard for me to get any news until something happens, so please let me know if you think he’s in danger.”

["And what do I get in return?"]

"I’ll pay you back however you want later. Please."

["Mph. You’d better not go back on your word."]

"Wow. Have people lied to you your whole life?"

["Well, it’s not a hard request, so fine. But if you two fought and he’s in a bad mood, I can’t just show up on the island anytime. He might shoot my helicopter down."]

“He wouldn’t.”

["Wouldn’t he? You don’t know, do you, Taekjoo?"]

“Know what?”

["Remember when you were kidnapped on that island, and government forces showed up, putting us both at risk? Well, after that, I think he set up some kind of defense system. I don’t know the details, but it seems it attacks any aircraft or missile approaching the island without permission. A few have already been shot down."]

Was she saying that Zhenya had set up an anti-aircraft missile defense system on the island?

Kwon Taekjoo suddenly recalled the time he’d left Ajinoki Island not too long ago. As he was leaving, he’d seen several planes scattered in pieces across the island. He’d assumed they’d crashed after confronting Zhenya directly, but now he wasn’t so sure. Kwon had always entered and exited the island with Zhenya by his side, so he’d never noticed the existence of a defense system.

Given the current situation, it was almost reassuring. If Ajinoki Island had become an impenetrable fortress, then no one would dare attack or threaten Zhenya recklessly.

["Anyway, I’ll keep an ear out for any news about him and let you know if I hear anything."]

“Alright. Even the smallest thing would help.”

["You two have a pretty chaotic love life. Okay, I’m hanging up,"] Olga muttered with a slightly annoyed tone, though Kwon Taekjoo could sense a hint of excitement at the prospect of something interesting finally happening.

Once the call ended, the silence in the house felt much heavier. He glanced at his phone again, but, as expected, there was still no sign of Zhenya.

What was he doing now? Was he sadly playing his double bass alone again? He might even be destroying everything around him in a fit of rage.

Honestly, for all Kwon Taekjoo knew, Zhenya could be watching him right now, given that he always managed to find a way to spy on him. With that ridiculous thought in mind, Kwon Taekjoo shouted into the empty room.

"Hey, Zhenya. Are you listening?"

Of course, there was no way anyone would answer him. Feeling foolish, Kwon Taekjoo scratched his neck and let himself fall onto the couch. He felt drained, with no idea where to even begin addressing the problem in front of him.

Several monotonous days passed. The 24 hours had always seemed too short. But now, with nothing to do, a single day felt unbearably long.

During that time, he'd confirmed a few things. First, his access to the NIS server had been revoked. He could no longer obtain any documents related to the failed operation or assess the current situation. He was effectively cut off from any work.

Second, the Vladivostok operation was being kept under tight secrecy. He combed through press articles from the area around the date of the operation, but nothing mentioned what had happened—only a simple report on a meeting between Russia and North Korea in Vladivostok for tech cooperation. The only report he could find about Foxtrot was a short article about an American man who died in a car accident involving a truck and a sedan. It was clear that Russia, the United States, South Korea, and Japan were working hard to bury everything.

Kwon Taekjoo had no way of finding out what happened to Park Jeong-ho, who had returned to North Korea, or whether the microorganism he discovered had been handed over to Russia and was now being researched for weaponization. Any attempt to dig deeper would only push these secrets further underground.

"Aah…"

Kwon Taekjoo put down the dumbbells and exhaled heavily. When his mind was filled with worries, he pushed his body to the limit to drown out the noise. After all, if his body was sore from the exertion, there was no room left to think of anything else. Pain and burn shot through him as fibers tore in his already bulging muscles. He'd spent so much time drenched in sweat. Normally, this was enough to clear his mind. But this time, the thoughts swirling in his head refused to leave him.

He sat down on the bench, thinking a little more exercise might help, when the doorbell rang. But there was no one who would visit him at this hour, and it was impossible his mother had suddenly returned home from Canada.

Could it be Zhenya?

As soon as the thought crossed his mind, he jumped up and rushed to the door. But the intercom screen showed another familiar face instead.

"Sunbae."

It was Yoon Jongwoo. The energy drained from Kwon Taekjoo's body, his frantic excitement fading into sudden exhaustion, though it was completely unexpected for Yoon Jongwoo to visit him at this hour.

"What are you doing here?"

"Wow… I didn't expect a warm welcome, but I didn't think you'd be this unhappy to see me. That's new."

"You should be busy working right now. Did you get fired?"

"Are you sure that's not your true feelings talking? I took half a day off." With a casual "I'm starving," he tried to push open the door, but Kwon Taekjoo didn't budge.

"If you're hungry, why come here? Is my house a restaurant now?"

"Your mom told me to stop by and eat. She made a ton of side dishes before she left."

"My mom?"

"Yeah. She must be worried about you. She called and said she'd be very grateful if I could check on you while she's in Canada."

"Well, you've seen me, so you can leave now."

"There you go, being cold again. I have some news you might be interested in, you know?"

Kwon Taekjoo's guard dropped immediately at those words. Yoon Jongwoo took advantage of the moment to swing the door open and step inside. Entering the kitchen, he noticed the dumbbells scattered across the floor and stared in shock.

"Wow! Have you seriously been lifting weights all day while cooped up at home? Why are you working out like you're training for the end of the world? You're going to ruin your joints if you keep this up."

"Looks like you could use some exercise yourself."

"Sunbae, you haven't eaten yet, have you? You'll need some protein to prevent muscle loss."

Ignoring Kwon Taekjoo's comment, Yoon Jongwoo busied himself in the kitchen, pulling out side dishes and reheating soup from the fridge. He even quickly made an egg roll before setting the table. "Come on, sit down," he said, taking a seat himself. Kwon Taekjoo couldn't tell who was the host and who was the guest.

Kwon Taekjoo sat down across from him without a word. When Yoon Jongwoo was about to take some soup, Kwon blocked his spoon with his own. As if expecting it, Yoon Jongwoo just switched to serving rice, but again, Kwon stopped him, pushing his forehead back with his spoon.

"Ow, sunbae! You're not supposed to mess with someone while they're eating. What's gotten into you?"

"Tell me. What news do you have?"

"Can't we talk about this after we eat?"

Kwon Taekjoo shook his head, slowly but firmly. Yoon Jongwoo cast a longing look at the delicious food in front of him and let out a long sigh. Suddenly, his gaze scanned the room with nervousness. He seemed worried someone might be watching or listening.

"He's not watching. I checked."

"Well, if you say so."

"How much longer are you going to drag this out? Stop beating around the bush and spit it out already."

"I, uh… I got a call from Miss Olga."

"From Olga?"

"Yes. She said you asked her to look into how Mr. Yevgeny's been doing lately."

"Why didn't she call me directly?"

"She's probably being cautious. The first thing she asked was why you and Mr. Yevgeny can't communicate. I told her I couldn't give her details because it might raise suspicions given the current situation."

"Oh, really? Then maybe I should report you for breaching national security."

"Oh, come on, we all know each other. Besides, I didn't tell her what's happening… I just told her exactly what I'm telling you."

"Wow, I don't know if you're optimistic or just plain naive. If talking to Yevgeny is a problem for me, why would it be any different for you? You're still an NIS agent, and she's the daughter of one of Russia's most notorious families. She's Yevgeny's sister."

"Well, uh… we're not that directly connected, you know? Miss Olga said that if anyone asked, we could just say we were getting to know each other."

Yoon Jongwoo's bashful smile and the slight blush in his cheeks irritated Kwon Taekjoo. After a disapproving click of his tongue, he casually asked, "So, what's the situation?"

"With Miss Olga?"

"No. With Yevgeny, that little bastard."

Kwon Taekjoo found himself speaking with more sharpness than intended. Yoon Jongwoo complained, "Why are you getting mad?" before continuing with Olga's message.

"Fortunately, he's not locked up anywhere. According to Miss Olga, he's isolated himself on an island, and no one's been able to get in or out."

"That's what you call news…?"

"Even if she wanted to know more, she couldn't. Mr. Yevgeny has blocked everything. Not only can no one approach the island, but he's cut off all lines of communication, so there's no way to spy on him."

In the past, when Kwon Taekjoo himself had been trapped on Ajinoki Island, he'd felt utterly helpless, with no way to escape on his own. When he asked Olga to check on Zhenya, he didn't expect her to infiltrate the island… he just needed her to find out what was happening within the family.

"Oh! She said you'd feel better if I told you this."

"Told me what?"

"Miss Olga's family doesn't seem too focused on Mr. Yevgeny at the moment. Apparently, they're busy dealing with something else."

"... Something else?"

Could it be the microorganism research from Mount Baekdu? Were they trying to sell a cure? Or were they truly planning to start a war? Both scenarios were equally disturbing, inhumane, and out of place in today's world.

"You. Have you heard anything about that?"

"A-A-About what?"

"Since when does the NIS completely abandon an operation just because it failed once? They have to have a backup plan."

"I don't know… Wow, these stir-fried dried shrimp and chili peppers are really delicious. Sunbae, eat. Your soup's getting cold."

Yoon Jongwoo clumsily changed the subject and continued eating. But his chopsticks trembled under Kwon Taekjoo's piercing gaze, unable to grasp a single shrimp. Kwon took a generous serving of shrimp and peppers and dropped them into Jongwoo's rice bowl, his sharp eyes fixed on him the entire time.

Jongwoo swallowed hard, nervously forcing himself to chew. Suddenly, he grew suspicious of his surroundings again. Kwon Taekjoo sighed heavily, scolding him for being so paranoid.

"I told you already, there are no listening devices here."

Despite Kwon Taekjoo's repeated reassurances, Yoon Jongwoo couldn't relax. He leaned in close and whispered, barely audibly, "Well, the thing is, the chief director has been busy trying to select an agent to send to Turkey and Iran. The executive board's also been holding multiple meetings recently."

"Right now, of all times?"

Yoon Jongwoo nodded several times.

"It'll probably be made public soon, but there's an upcoming trilateral summit."

"A trilateral summit? Who's involved?"

"Apparently, the leaders of Iran, Turkey, and Russia will be meeting in Tehran."

Kwon Taekjoo's mind went blank at the unexpected combination. For some reason, he couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that he may have ignited the fuse of a massive ticking time bomb.

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Chapter End Notes

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Restart The Game

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•SPANISH DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Office of the Chief Director of the NIS Foreign Intelligence Bureau.

A plaque reading “Director of Foreign Intelligence, Kwak Younghan” sat on a large office desk. Behind it, Director Kwak watched his monitor intently, his expression grim.

With the executive council meeting approaching, he was reviewing the profiles of undercover agents actively deployed in the Middle East. He needed to find a suitable agent for the latest mission. The situation called for a seasoned veteran, someone fiercely loyal... someone with the judgment and determination to carry out the mission, no matter the risks.

Over the past few years, political shifts in Korea had led to significant structural changes within the NIS. The former counterintelligence unit for North Korea had been merged into the foreign intelligence division under the first deputy director. This expansion had increased the agency's scope and responsibilities. The only problem was that the number of agents had remained stagnant, and there were no new recruits willing to take on such dangerous missions today. Meanwhile, the number of retiring agents kept rising, and there were fewer and fewer replacements to fill their roles, leaving the department overwhelmed.

Finding an agent familiar with the Middle East posed an even greater challenge. Occasionally, individuals stationed there long-term would accept missions from the NIS, but many were double agents working for their own benefit. Additionally, Iran was a state friendly to the North Korean regime. Thus, he had to be especially careful in choosing whom to send on the mission.

He went over the work histories of several candidates again and again. But despite the countless reviews, he couldn’t find anyone who seemed fit for the mission at hand.

Grabbing his aching head, just about to take a break, a knock echoed through the office. He quickly closed the files on his screen and called out, “Come in.” His secretary entered promptly and bowed.

“What is it?”

“G1 wishes to see you urgently, sir.”

Kwon Taekjoo? Now? What could he be doing here? According to reports, he had been laying low at home. Director Kwak had assumed he was quietly accepting his punishment, but perhaps that wasn’t the case. Was he here to plead his innocence again?

“Send him in.”

After a brief moment of deliberation, Director Kwak decided to allow Kwon Taekjoo inside. Once the secretary left, Kwon Taekjoo entered the office. The director immediately set boundaries while Kwon Taekjoo greeted him with a bow.

“I have an important meeting after this. Ten minutes. That’s all I can give you.”

“I won’t need that long.”

“What brings you here? I recall clearly telling you I’d call you when the time was right. You should be resting at home.”

“I want to know what happened to Park Jeong-ho.”

Director Kwak tilted his head at the sudden request.

“That man should be long forgotten by now.”

“I’ve been going over what happened again and again during my probation. The fact that our intelligence activities were exposed means that Russia and North Korea realized we’ve been monitoring them. Despite their reputation for not caring what other nations think, they wouldn’t continue their original plans as expected. But neither would they abandon it altogether, given the time and effort they’ve already invested. Are you sure Park Jeong-ho returned to North Korea?”

Director Kwak didn’t answer, simply staring at Kwon Taekjoo, who held firm with his unwavering gaze. A long silence hung between them.

Finally, the director leaned back in his chair and shook his head, ending the conversation.

“Whatever happened, it’s no longer in your hands.”

“If the mission regarding this issue is still ongoing, I’d like to handle it myself.”

“Look, I understand you want to tie up loose ends, but you need to stay out of this. Emotions will only interfere with our work.”

“Can’t you at least give me the chance to explain myself?”

Director Kwak raised his eyebrows at the question.

“Explain yourself?”

“I was pulled from the operation based on suspicions, accused of things I never did. It feels like all my years of work were thrown away. How long will I remain on probation? If I keep waiting, will anyone ever clear my name?”

“The fate of this country is at stake. We can’t afford to worry about your personal honor...”

“If we lose even our honor, what else do we have in this line of work?”

“.....”

An honorable sacrifice for the country. Without even that statement of respect, there would be nothing left to justify their sacrifices. The personal lives they gave up and the lies they told their loved ones would have all been in vain.

“Let me finish this. Ambassador Bogdanov won’t interfere this time. I’ll prove my innocence through results.”

Director Kwak’s concerns only deepened. The agency remained divided on what to do with Kwon Taekjoo. The Anti-Communist Investigation Unit had pushed for a thorough investigation into his potential illegal ties with Ambassador Bogdanov, while the director had argued that Zhenya should be regarded as Kwon Taekjoo’s personal informant. After all, Zhenya’s involvement had always played an essential role in NIS plans.

But in the end, they hadn’t been able to reach a solution. It was decided to delay the matter until Zhenya returned to Korea. In the meantime, Kwon Taekjoo would be sidelined from all missions. Any attempt to assign him a new mission would only meet strong opposition.

“I heard there’s an upcoming tripartite summit with Russia, Iran, and Turkey in Tehran. That wasn’t part of their original plans. Given the timing, they’re likely going to discuss the Baekdu Mountain microbe.”

“Likely? Yes, that’s probable.”

“And if I’m not mistaken, you don’t currently have any agents ready to deploy in the Middle East.”

“That is indeed our biggest setback.”

Director Kwak relaxed, a smile breaking through his tense expression. The truth was, the NIS had very few agents assigned to missions in the Middle East.

They needed a determined agent who wasn’t motivated by personal gain and who was fiercely loyal to the mission. A veteran with extensive experience. Someone fluent in Persian,

and knowledgeable about the Middle East. Only one man fit that description—Kwon Taekjoo.

After a long pause, Director Kwak finally spoke, his tone grave.

“Not long ago, we received an urgent message from Park Jeong-ho.”

“Park Jeong-ho?”

“Yes. He says that in exchange for giving us the information we need, he requests asylum in another country.”

“But Park Jeong-ho has...”

“A family, yes. A wife and children.”

Director Kwak handed Kwon Taekjoo his tablet. As soon as the screen lit up, he saw a photo of Park Jeong-ho’s family. They looked like any normal, happy family. When Kwon Taekjoo swiped to the next image, the screen displayed a local map of the border region between North Korea and China. A theoretical escape route was marked on it.

“As you know, Russia, Turkey, and Iran are about to hold a tripartite summit. What’s strange is that Park Jeong-ho will also be attending. He was granted authorization as part of a special delegation and is now listed as a guest researcher at Pharmzaschita. Given the circumstances, it’s likely that Russia will bring up the Baekdu Mountain microorganism during the conference. Iran and Russia have long been anti-U.S. powers... and with Turkey’s current government leaning anti-U.S. and pro-Russian, it’s no surprise.”

“What do we need to do?”

“We need to extract Park Jeong-ho safely. While he’s in Iran, a local group opposed to the regime will work with agents in China to evacuate his family from North Korea. Our job is to secure Park Jeong-ho before anyone realizes what’s happening. We’ve already discussed our plans with the embassy in Iran.”

So, they had to secure Park Jeong-ho, and in return, they would get information about the Baekdu Mountain microbe. The mission itself seemed straightforward. However, they only had one chance, and any mistake in timing would ruin everything. Given that this was a summit conference, security measures would be tight. In fact, it could be nearly impossible to get close to Park Jeong-ho in such a setting.

Still, Kwon Taekjoo had to succeed. Justifying his past unusual actions and proving his worth through action... was the only solution he could find for himself.

After leaving the director’s office, Kwon Taekjoo soon found himself approaching the main entrance. His gaze drifted to the dark marble panel above it. Engraved into its surface were just over twenty stars. Beneath them, a small inscription read: “We dedicate our lives to protecting the nation, following the paths of these noble lives, now silent stars.”

These so-called “Nameless Stars” were a tribute to the agents who had died in the line of duty. They also represented the footsteps of those who had walked the same dangerous path Kwon Taekjoo was now treading. Their silent but noble sacrifices were what allowed South Korea to exist as it did today. Everyone who enjoyed a peaceful life was indebted to them. Yet, no one would ever know their names. Such was the fate of intelligence agents.

Kwon Taekjoo had often wondered if he would one day lie among those stars. He once believed that if he died for his country, it would at least give meaning to his death. A normal life, success, love, friendship, money, fame... he had set aside all those personal ambitions to choose a grueling and dangerous path, thinking that death could provide him with some kind of peace.

But did he still think that way? Could he really spend his final moments at peace, knowing he would die without regrets?

He was lost in thought, questioning himself, when suddenly he heard a voice calling out from behind.

“Sunbae!”

When he turned around, he saw Yoon Jongwoo running towards him, out of breath. For some reason, his face was pale.

“Hey, hey, you’re going to trip.”

“Aah, aah...”

“Ugh, you’re so out of shape. You’re always winded after running just a bit. I’ve told you before, you should start working out before it’s too late.”

“Aah, aah, is this really the time to talk about exercise?”

“Why not?”

“I heard you met with the chief director! Don’t tell me they actually assigned you to the new mission.”

“What do you mean ‘don’t tell me’? Who would be more suitable for the job than me?”

Yoon Jongwoo clenched his fist at Kwon Taekjoo’s indifferent response and started yelling at him.

“I knew it! I knew this would happen. You should be resting... Why are you doing this to yourself when you’ve just come back? It’s not like anyone’s going to appreciate your efforts! They falsely accused you of a ton of things again. Do you really still feel so loyal to the NIS?!”

“You’re going to make my ears bleed, Jongwoo.”

“I’m frustrated, okay? What are you, Superman? Is the entire country going to fall apart if you’re not around? Why do you keep taking on these dangerous missions? That’s a mental illness, you know... it’s called a savior complex.”

“...You bastard. You really laid into me today, didn’t you? I was accused of something I didn’t do, so I have to clear my name. If I just sit back and do nothing, who’s going to do it for me? And,” he added, as if muttering to himself, “yeah, maybe I shouldn’t go, but I’m not going to let ‘that bastard’ turn into a criminal overnight.”

Yoon Jongwoo was about to ask what Kwon Taekjoo meant when he suddenly stopped. Kwon Taekjoo’s gaze had shifted from him to the wall in front of them. Yoon Jongwoo followed his eyes and saw the “Nameless Stars.”

“Have you ever imagined yourself up there?”

“What? Why would you say something so horrible? That’s the last thing I’d ever want!”

“Really?”

“Of course! Dying without anyone even knowing my name? What would be the point of dying for the country? My family would never know how or where I died, and the people I sacrificed my life to protect wouldn’t even know I existed. And the government? They’d praise my noble death for a moment, only to set me aside and immediately find my replacement.”

“Yet, here you are, still doing this job.”

“No one thinks like you anymore, sunbae. What matters most is personal safety. If you have energy left after making sure of that, then you can think about serving your country. You don’t have to waste your life to be a patriot... just working for the country and paying your taxes on time is more than enough.”

Yoon Jongwoo was getting worked up, defending himself, when he suddenly turned on Kwon Taekjoo again.

“Sunbae, you should take my words to heart, too. Don’t let yourself be tempted by grand ideals like loyalty, sacrifice, and honor. Think about your mother. It would be too cruel for her. You’d be the worst son in history!”

“I get it, brat.”

Kwon Taekjoo reached out and pinched Yoon Jongwoo’s cheek, then let go. Yoon Jongwoo grabbed his face with both hands, making a show of how much it hurt. As they bickered back and forth, Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t take his eyes off the stars engraved on the monument.

Kwon Taekjoo entered Zhenya's home with a familiar ease. The sound of the door closing behind him seemed to echo louder than usual. He had always come here as if it were his own

home, but today everything felt strange and foreign. Maybe it was because the owner wasn't there to greet him.

He walked slowly, carefully checking for any surveillance devices that weren't there before. He always did the same, even though he knew Zhenya would never let anyone infiltrate his property easily. Luckily, there were no signs of anyone else in the place.

Kwon Taekjoo started to open a window to let in some air but stopped himself. The scent of Zhenya in the house had already faded to the faintest trace. He didn't want to risk losing what little was left to the outside air.

He stood there, alone in the spacious house, before making his way to the fridge. When he opened the door, he found some side dishes that he had put in the refrigerator himself, still untouched. But the scrambled eggs he had made for Zhenya before he left for Vladivostok were gone. Had Zhenya eaten them or thrown them out? He could imagine Zhenya sitting at the table alone, eating the poorly cooked meal, smiling at Kwon Taekjoo's pathetic attempt.

Kwon Taekjoo chuckled at the thought, but quickly composed himself and awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. He had made quite a scene on Ajinoki Island, acting as if he would never see Zhenya again. But now, without Zhenya, all he could think about was him. He was as much of a lunatic as Zhenya was.

Kwon Taekjoo slowly settled onto the sofa. His surroundings felt incredibly quiet, making his own breathing stand out. When would he see Zhenya again? Would Zhenya return as if nothing had happened once Kwon Taekjoo cleared his name and resolved all the misunderstandings? And what if he didn't?

"Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere. The only time I won't be by your side is when you're dead."

When Kwon Taekjoo had left Zhenya on Ajinoki Island, he never thought about ending their relationship. He had been so furious that his mission had been ruined and that Zhenya had put himself in danger that he couldn't bear to look at him. Should he have held back?

"Taekjoo. Do what you want to do, and I'll follow you. I came all this way to devote myself to you. Every minute of your life, I'll always be chasing after you, now and forever. I might get annoyed sometimes, but one thing's for sure: I've never found anything as captivating as you."

Did Kwon Taekjoo really believe Zhenya wouldn't chase after him? Did he really not see it coming? He already knew exactly why Zhenya was staying in Korea when he had no personal ties to the country.

"Oh? Are you saying you don't care about dying for your precious work? And I'm supposed to just stand by and watch? You fought desperately to survive when you fell into my hands, but now you're willing to throw it all away? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard from you. Taekjoo, stop being so stubborn. Is that really what you want?"

Kwon Taekjoo had never worried much about his own safety during missions, believing he only needed to complete his work and return home safely, as he always did. But maybe that had just been his arrogance talking.

What if the roles were reversed, and it was Zhenya taking on such dangerous missions? Would Kwon Taekjoo be able to stand idly by if Zhenya said he was willing to sacrifice his life for his country? No, absolutely not. He would tell him to stop spouting nonsense and drag him by the collar.

Kwon Taekjoo scratched his head in frustration, scolding himself, when his eyes drifted to the laptop on the table. A sudden memory came to mind.

He slowly pulled the laptop toward him and turned it on. When it booted up, the system prompted him to identify himself with his fingerprint and iris. He leaned forward, placed his thumb on the touchpad, and positioned his eye in front of the camera. After a moment, the computer unlocked, revealing the home screen. Only one app was installed.

"A home security camera? What's this about? Are you thinking of getting a dog?"

"Taekjoo, you really should show me more love and attention."

"What the hell are you talking about this time?"

Without a word, Zhenya launched the app. Instantly, the screen was filled with a live feed from a camera. Kwon Taekjoo immediately recognized the scene. It was undoubtedly Zhenya's house on Ajinoki Island.

"Why install a home camera there? Planning to raise a pet on that island? You don't even go there often. Neglect is abuse, you know."

"Mh? So you know that, Taekjoo."

"Know what?"

"That neglect is abuse," Zhenya teased, with a mischievous glint in his eyes. Kwon Taekjoo cleared his throat, uncomfortable, and changed the subject.

"So? What are you planning to do with this?"

"Taekjoo, you're always missing me and wondering what I'm up to, so I had no choice but to give you a way to check on me. Now, when I'm not around, you don't have to hug my poor pillow and fret. You can complain all you want right here."

"What the hell? When did I ever hug your damn pillow?!"

"Mmm. Still as shy as ever, I see."

"Seriously, why do something so useless like this? You know video calls exist, right? Couldn't you just call me?"

“Not exactly... I’m planning to cut off all communication with the island.”

“So you want to isolate yourself even more than you already are?”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

“Weirdo. Anyway, I don’t need this, so get rid of it.”

“I told you, there’s no need to be embarrassed. Spy on me all you want.”

Zhenya kept pushing the matter, so Kwon Taekjoo eventually gave in. He figured it didn’t matter if Zhenya installed a camera in his house as long as he didn’t use it himself.

But, of course, that resolution didn’t last long. Zhenya frequently disappeared on his trips, and each time, Kwon Taekjoo was left without a way to contact him. Apparently, Zhenya had followed through on his promise to cut off all communication with Ajinoki Island.

With no other choice, Kwon Taekjoo would occasionally turn on the camera to check on Zhenya. During his absence, Zhenya didn’t send him a single message, but every time Kwon Taekjoo called through the camera, Zhenya would appear immediately on the screen. Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t help feeling secretly relieved and inexplicably irritated whenever he saw his pretty face.

“What the hell? You said you’d be back in a week. What’s keeping you for so long?”

["Things just turned out that way."]

“‘Turned out that way’? Are you serious? You bastard, you don’t feel even a shred of guilt, do you? You always leave and never think about coming back.”

["Why the sudden outburst? Did you miss me so much that you can't bear it anymore?"]

Even as Kwon Taekjoo lashed out at him, Zhenya would just smile, enjoying his frustration. Every time this happened, Kwon Taekjoo would roll his eyes and carefully examine his face for any new injuries. Zhenya, on the other hand, would instantly become smug, pleased that Kwon Taekjoo had come looking for him first. The way he lifted his chin and straightened his shoulders said it all.

["Are you that desperate to see me? I suppose I’ve been away long enough to make you all hot and bothered. Really, your patience is thinning by the day."]

“Hot and bothered? Who do you think you're talking about?”

["Are you really denying it?"]

Zhenya provocatively lowered his eyelids and teased Kwon Taekjoo. Then he leaned back and began unzipping his pants to pull out his cock without warning. It was the first time Kwon Taekjoo watched him masturbate. Zhenya had always been one to sit back and watch after forcing Kwon Taekjoo to jerk off, pouncing on him only when arousal drove him to satisfy his needs. He never took care of these things on his own.

Maybe that was why Zhenya's growing erection didn't seem so unpleasant to Kwon Taekjoo. In fact, he was concentrating on his every move with bated breath. Every time Zhenya moved his hand up and down, Kwon Taekjoo's body responded in tune. Zhenya had touched him so often and with such intensity that seeing him now stirred up old sensations. Zhenya's back shuddered each time his long, pale fingers slid along his cock. It was as if each grip and touch of his erection shot straight to Kwon Taekjoo's own cock, squeezing it with the same rhythmic movements.

Kwon Taekjoo's body heated up quickly, and his breathing became shallow. Zhenya, who was still teasing himself, seemed to notice the change and abruptly pulled his hand away. At the same time, Kwon Taekjoo let out a low moan. He shuddered a moment later, realizing what he'd done, but Zhenya was already smiling triumphantly on the screen.

["Taekjoo. Are you just going to keep watching me? It must be torture for you to only look."]

"... Damn it."

Unable to restrain himself anymore, Kwon Taekjoo unbuckled his belt and pulled out his burning cock. The mere grasp of his swollen shaft sent a stabbing pain and overwhelming pleasure shooting down his back, and his widely spread knees trembled unsteadily. Kwon Taekjoo began to squeeze his engorged cock with overwhelming pressure. A shudder shook his body so intensely that his vision began to blur.

“Ahh, aah... ugh, shit...”

Kwon Taekjoo could no longer stifle his rapid breathing and moaning. Driven solely by the need to reach orgasm as soon as possible, his hand was frantically running up and down his aroused cock. But, for some reason, the pleasure was not as intense as he had expected.

[“Taekjoo. You should stroke it gentler. Remember how I always touch you?”]

As if to show him, Zhenya slid his hand down his own cock, from the base to the tip, in one smooth motion. He circled the head with the palm of his hand, stroking it gently, then massaged its entire length before slowly moving back up. His entire cock twitched and a drop of pre-seminal fluid glistened on the head.

Kwon Taekjoo fixed his gaze on the screen, mirroring Zhenya's movements. The ache in his cock, a lingering pain from the rough treatment earlier, began to melt away as he succumbed to the familiar rhythm. A deep wave of pleasure surged through him, wrapping his entire body in its intensity.

[“Stroke it from the base to the tip, gently and slowly.”].

“Mmn, nngh... Aahh...”

["Aahh, you always like it when I rub my hand all over your glans.Mm, that's it, just like that. Taekjoo..."]

“Mmm, just, shut up, ugh... aah...”

[“Now squeeze it a little harder. Aah, squeeze it, then let go, and press the tip again.”]

“Aah, mmngh, mmmh, shit...”

[“Taekjoo. You sound so good, whining pitifully like this.”]

With the sound of Zhenya's sweet voice and his ragged breathing, Kwon Taekjoo began to slowly reach orgasm. He was only stroking his cock, but a subtle tingling sensation was creeping up his chest and ass. Maybe even that was a conditioned reaction.

“Aaah, mmngh, aah.... aahhh...!”

[“Taekjoo, Taekjoo...Mnn, Taekjoo, mmgh...!”]

A few moments later, they both came intensely. Zhenya's semen splashed on the camera, dripping slowly down the lens.

["Ahh... Well, what did you think, Taekjoo? Are you feeling a little better now?"]

"...You bastard. I feel like I’m dying, so get your ass over here already."

Zhenya let out a loud laugh at Kwon Taekjoo's frustrated tone.

["Clearly, this place isn’t as fun without you,"] Zhenya murmured in a hollow voice. He bit his lower lip and then slowly licked it. It was obvious he was disappointed that he couldn’t kiss Kwon Taekjoo.

Kwon Taekjoo was about to snap back, telling him to come over if he wanted to so badly, but suddenly stopped when he saw his own reflection on the dark screen. He looked just like Zhenya. At some point, he had started biting his lip, exactly like Zhenya.

"....."

Zhenya might have left the camera on. Kwon Taekjoo had no idea if he was even on Ajinoki Island right now, but he had to take that chance.

He turned on the tracking app. The screen stayed idle for a moment before switching to the familiar view of Zhenya's living room. There was no sign of him. Holding his breath, Kwon Taekjoo strained to pick up any trace of sound, but he couldn’t hear anything.

Kwon Taekjoo tried to say something. He opened his mouth but could only manage a sigh. After a long moment of hesitation, he finally said his name.

"Zhenya."

Zhenya had secluded himself in the basement, studying a particular blueprint. He was making the necessary adjustments to test the interception missiles deployed all over the island. The current system had enough firepower to track and shoot down most helicopters, but it still wasn't enough. Zhenya needed a flawless, foolproof system—one capable of defending

against and easily taking down both fighter jets and their ballistic missiles. This was part of his plan to turn Ajinoki Island into an impenetrable fortress. It was also a personal hobby, something he'd enjoyed working on long before meeting Kwon Taekjoo.

Since he was a child, he had been fascinated by anything that could make him stronger. For some, raw ambition could outweigh natural talent or specialized knowledge. In Zhenya's case, this drive showed itself through his obsession with weapons. Without any formal training or academic guidance, he sketched designs for new weapons, turning his imagination into reality. Even if he encountered unexpected obstacles, he was quick to find solutions.

It was much easier to analyze the operating function of a machine than that of a human being. He liked that his machines rewarded his efforts with matching firepower and would never betray their owner. Even if an unexpected error occurred, he only needed to make a few adjustments to get them working again.

In this sense, humans were rather irritating and annoying. They never behaved as he wanted, and once broken, they were impossible to fix. Most of the time, Zhenya thought it would be easier to just destroy them altogether. However, there was one person who had slipped into Zhenya's life that he couldn't do that to.

"....."

At least, when he examined his blueprints, his mind stayed clear of distracting thoughts. He had spent entire days in the basement without feeling tired or hungry. But, for some reason, this time was different. No matter how much he tried to stop his scattered thoughts, they kept drifting back to Kwon Taekjoo.

By now, Kwon Taekjoo would have safely returned to Korea, and it was obvious what kind of reception awaited him after his stubborn return.

Just in case Kwon Taekjoo had been imprisoned, Zhenya had tracked the microchip he'd implanted in him from time to time. He'd noticed that Kwon Taekjoo spent four days at the NIS before returning home, where he stayed for several more days. Knowing Kwon Taekjoo, who was incapable of sitting still unless he was asleep, it was strange for him to stay at home. Zhenya considered all sorts of possibilities. Maybe he'd been injured due to brutal torture, or perhaps he was in a situation that prevented him from leaving his residence.

As his unpleasant thoughts continued swirling, a flame of anger ignited within him. He couldn't help but think Kwon Taekjoo was a fool for returning, fully aware of the risks. Zhenya couldn't understand why he sacrificed so much for a country that could easily turn its back on him and that had already taken the lives of his family. The life of an agent was one spent between the shadows of honor and glory, only to disappear into complete darkness.

Zhenya had no idea where to even begin unraveling the greatest dilemma of his life... that was Kwon Taekjoo, especially since he had no similar relationship in his past to apply the same formula.

["Zhenya."]

He froze mid-movement. It was an instinctive reaction, not a conscious decision. Maybe he'd been so consumed by thoughts of Kwon Taekjoo that he'd imagined it, but he could have sworn he heard his voice.

["Yevgeny."]

When he was about to dismiss it as a hallucination, another sound rang out, clearer this time. Zhenya rose immediately and climbed the stairs. Although he moved with long, wide strides, he couldn't shake an odd sense of frustration. His heart was pounding intensely, causing an inner discomfort.

There was no way Kwon Taekjoo could have returned. The radar system would have alerted him to any approaching aircraft, and he hadn't heard the whir of helicopter blades. It had to be a misunderstanding, but Zhenya continued searching restlessly through the vast expanse of his home.

No matter where he looked, there were no signs of any intruder. He couldn't even catch Kwon Taekjoo's scent. Maybe it was all in his head.

["Are you listening?"]

Zhenya was about to turn around, cursing himself, when an even clearer voice echoed through the house. He followed it instantly, heading straight to the living room. Soon, the blinking light of the home camera on the table became visible. Was that where it was coming from? He stood in place for a moment, staring at it intently. Kwon Taekjoo's voice filtered through again, as if confirming that he hadn't imagined it.

["I've been assigned a new mission. This time it won't take long."]

A laugh of disbelief escaped him. After their heated argument, with Kwon Taekjoo walking away as if he never wanted to see him again, the first thing he said after days of silence was that he was on a new mission? Was Zhenya hearing this right? Something had to be wrong with him.

Seeing Kwon Taekjoo prioritize his work again, after insisting they needed time alone, only to set aside their unresolved issues, made Zhenya feel incredibly angry. Every time he gave Kwon Taekjoo what he wanted; he'd ask for more. And if Zhenya allowed it again, there'd be another new demand. Humans were such ambitious, selfish creatures.

Maybe he should just track down Kwon Taekjoo and tie him down by his side. At least then, the wave of frustration and anger swirling within him might subside a little. His dark emotions churned just beneath the surface.

Meanwhile, Kwon Taekjoo, who had no way of knowing what Zhenya was thinking, continued speaking on his own. His tone was calmer and more serene than ever, making him sound almost affectionate.

["I've already made my decision. When I return, I'll tell you everything, including what I haven't been able to say before. So, don't try to follow me or get involved. Just wait for me

quietly."]

Kwon Taekjoo only acted this warmly when he felt guilty.

["This isn't an order. I'm asking as a favor,"] he added after a brief pause. His voice was sweeter and softer than ever, completely unlike him.

["Once I'm done, I'll come back for you, okay? Zhenya."]

"....."

Kwon Taekjoo persuaded him with a patient, gentle tone, as if Zhenya were a six-year-old child. Zhenya looked at the camera with a look of disapproval, as if the small device were Kwon Taekjoo himself.

Unfortunately, those were Kwon Taekjoo's last words. Zhenya waited a while, hoping for more, but only silence remained. Only then did he approach, replaying Kwon Taekjoo's voice recording over and over.

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Chapter End Notes

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Restart The Game

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•PERSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Tehran, Capital of Iran.

Even in the early hours of dawn, crowds of tourists came and went nonstop at Milad Tower. From its observation deck, standing 435 meters high, one could enjoy a panoramic view of the entire city.

Blending in as just another tourist, Kwon Taekjoo used his spyglass to scan government buildings, mosques, and the airport in full. His spyglass had a magnification lens powerful enough to reveal each tile on the Golestan Palace, located 15 kilometers away. In the sunlight, the glass mosaic tiles shimmered on the palace, showcasing a distinctly Persian architectural style.

Surrounding Tehran was Mount Tochal, where snow remained year-round. The exotic atmosphere created by the grand bazaar, the Imamzadeh Saleh shrine near the Tajrish bazaar, and the ash-colored houses lining the city made Kwon Taekjoo feel deeply immersed in its heart.

In the city center, security measures were underway in anticipation of the upcoming summit between Russia and Turkey. Streets designated for official visitors were closed off, while patrol cars and military trucks circulated the area at 10-minute intervals. Military police, organized in pairs, meticulously inspected each alley, working diligently to maintain public order. Kwon Taekjoo even managed to spot a few undercover agents lurking and snipers stationed throughout the area. The entire city seemed locked down.

He had anticipated this level of surveillance. From a technical standpoint, the operation was relatively simple. There was no need to bypass multiple layers of defense to infiltrate enemy

lines, abduct targets, or steal specific items. His only task was to gain entry to the hotel where the Russian delegation would be staying and establish contact with Park Jeong-ho. Access and escape routes had already been planned. Now, it was simply a matter of waiting for their safe arrival.

Given that this was a trilateral summit, security protocol would focus on the presidents. Moreover, the Russian delegation wouldn't go out of its way to monitor Park Jeong-ho, an Asian man who would stand out among them. Any attempt to do so would attract far too much attention.

["The Russian president's private jet has entered Iranian airspace."]

Kwon Taekjoo was about to check his wristwatch, expecting their arrival at any moment, when the confirmation he'd been waiting for finally came through his earpiece.

Through his spyglass, he scanned the sky and spotted an approaching plane from the East. It was the Ilyushin IL-96, the Russian president's private jet. The escorting Iranian fighter jets suddenly veered off in various directions, vanishing from sight.

Down at the airport, a crowd was already lined up to greet his arrival. Typically, the prime minister received foreign dignitaries at summits, but today, in a rare display of formality, the Iranian president himself awaited.

["The Russian president's private jet has landed at Mehrabad International Airport in Tehran."]

Kwon Taekjoo focused on the airplane door, now stationary. It soon opened, revealing Russian President Lomonosov and his wife. The pair paused briefly for a commemorative photo before descending the stairs to meet the Iranian president and his spouse. Among the entourage, Kwon Taekjoo spotted the Russian president's advisor—a face he recognized all too well. It was Zhenya's second older brother, Bazim.

"So he came all this way, huh? …I swear, he's always involved somehow," muttered Kwon Taekjoo, shifting his gaze to scan the faces of the rest of the group. However, for some reason, he couldn't spot Park Jeong-ho, let alone any other Asian man. Was he in disguise?

"Hmm, why would they go to such lengths to hide him? They must be really concerned this time."

Shaking his head, Kwon Taekjoo pulled a single-use contact lens from his jacket pocket. He tore open the sealed packaging and carefully placed it in his eye, blinking to settle it in place. After another look through his spyglass, he began scanning the faces in the group once more. Numbers started appearing in his peripheral vision, listing the height of each individual. Since Park Jeong-ho was 172 centimeters tall, identifying him wouldn't take long.

Narrowing his eyes, Kwon Taekjoo scrutinized each potential target. The special lens pressed lightly against his eye, scanning each body within his view. There was only one person not carrying a firearm.

“Target identified.”

He quickly relayed the information and then refocused on the city. Armed soldiers lined the restricted roads, while undercover agents discreetly took up their assigned positions. Police officers began clearing pedestrians from the control lines, checking IDs of anyone suspicious. Snipers were trained from various high structures—mosque towers, pillars, and rooftop terraces.

Just then, the Milad Tower, where Kwon Taekjoo stood, began to close off as well. Security personnel came up, guiding all visitors down with the pretext of urgent maintenance work.

“I guess it’s time I make my exit, too.”

Blending in with the stream of tourists, Kwon Taekjoo descended the tower. Once outside, he slipped into his parked vehicle with practiced ease, secured his phone in its mount, and activated the navigation system.

“G1 on the move. Requesting target location.”

Moments later, the target's current position appeared on the screen, along with an estimated travel route and the best approach path to avoid restricted roads. Kwon Taekjoo selected one of the routes and eased onto the main road.

[“The target is moving along the usual route.”]

The Iranian and Russian presidents, along with their entourages, sped down the road, flanked by dozens of police and security vehicles. Traffic signals had been adjusted to clear their path, ensuring a smooth, uninterrupted passage. Kwon Taekjoo kept a cautious distance, trying to determine whether his target was moving within the expected zone. He also needed to observe if his target interacted with others or if there were signs of anyone trailing them. It was his job to protect the target if danger arose.

The navigation system guided him through narrow, deserted alleyways. Kwon Taekjoo had no choice but to follow, as he needed to avoid restricted roads. Although it was challenging to drive there with the numerous parked cars and pedestrians appearing unexpectedly, Kwon Taekjoo didn’t slow down for a moment. With his level of experience, he could maneuver through such tight spaces with his eyes closed.

"... Huh?"

Kwon Taekjoo was driving at a steady pace when he felt a sudden wave of unease. He slowed down to a stop, leaning forward, eyes fixed on the rooftop of a large hotel. It was the kind of place where snipers would typically be stationed, yet for some reason, he couldn’t spot any. He continued scanning the rooftop with his spyglass, then inspected the building across the street. The result was the same—no one was there.

Had the snipers already been pulled back? Impossible. His target was still en route to the Sa'dabad Complex for the official assembly. All security personnel were supposed to remain

in position until both delegations arrived safely at their destination. Could something have forced the snipers to abandon their posts?

"... Eh?"

Just then, a figure emerged on the rooftop of the hotel Kwon Taekjoo had been watching. The sniper, who had somehow managed to conceal his presence, had finally reappeared. A similar movement occurred on the building across the street.

"What on earth are they doing?"

If they were really snipers, they wouldn't be allowed to lose sight of the target until the mission was complete. That was the one absolute rule for all snipers, whether their purpose was to protect or eliminate a target. If only one guard had left his position, it might have been understandable, but now more than one was breaking protocol. Something was off. Kwon Taekjoo had to find out what was going on.

"This is G1. Noticed an anomaly. I'll need to investigate before proceeding."

["G1, you're authorized to proceed."]

"Calling in support team. Requesting access to Espinas Hotel."

After calling for reinforcements, Kwon Taekjoo drove toward the suspicious hotel. He flashed an Iranian police ID to the parking attendant who approached his vehicle.

"I'll be right back, so keep the car here."

"Yes, sir."

He exited the vehicle and entered the hotel. The lobby was bustling, likely because check-in time was nearing its end. Staff hurried back and forth, rushing to push carts and assist guests. Kwon Taekjoo quickly reached the reception desk, where he once again presented his police ID.

"I'm with the police. Due to a VIP security issue, I'm here to ensure the hotel's security staff are performing their duties correctly."

"Oh, we were instructed to check the identity of all visitors. If you don't mind, could we make a copy of your ID, sir?"

"Go ahead."

The receptionist left the counter and headed into a back room. It seemed to be taking a while, likely because they were calling the police station to confirm his credentials. They were being very thorough in their inspection… could his suspicions have been unfounded? Although Kwon Taekjoo wondered if he'd wasted his time by stopping here, he couldn't shake the strange feeling of unease.

"Thank you for your patience, sir."

The receptionist soon returned, handing back his ID. His support team must have successfully intercepted the call.

"You're authorized to inspect the hotel, but due to our policy, we can't provide you with a master key. Our security team will accompany you instead."

"Ah, that won't be necessary. I'm just here for a quick sweep of the area."

"I'm sorry, but we need to keep track of everything happening in the hotel."

They couldn't have been more strict with protocol. Kwon Taekjoo knew that if he did anything to raise suspicion now, it would only make things harder later on. Two imposing security guards approached from the surveillance office and escorted him to an exclusive staff elevator. He followed without protest. Although the elevator was spacious, the presence of three men made the space feel almost claustrophobic. One of the guards scanned his access card and looked at Kwon Taekjoo, waiting for him to select the floor. Kwon Taekjoo pressed the button, and the doors closed silently.

When the elevator reached the top floor, Kwon Taekjoo was the only one who exited. He dragged the two unconscious guards into a nearby utility room and left them inside. After removing their radios and access cards, he quickly ascended the restricted emergency staircase.

Moving soundlessly, he headed toward the rooftop. It didn't take him long to reach its entrance. Silently, he raised his wristwatch toward the heavy door and used a specialized lens to scan the area beyond with a thermal map. One figure lay collapsed on the ground, while another was poised to fire. Kwon Taekjoo suspected the downed sniper had been part of the Iranian security team and had been ambushed by an infiltrator with an objective other than protecting the main target.

There was no way to confirm who the intruder on the other side of the door was targeting. The main issue was that this sniper could disrupt the plans of the Russian delegation and, in turn, ruin Kwon Taekjoo's own mission. He had to stop him.

Kwon Taekjoo pulled out a small explosive and attached it to the door. After taking cover by the stairwell, he pressed a side button on his wristwatch. Moments later, the bomb detonated, blowing the door off its hinges. Amid the ensuing chaos, Kwon Taekjoo rolled onto the rooftop and fired at the figure that appeared on his thermal map. The sniper dropped instantly, with no chance to react.

Suddenly, a bullet whizzed past him from behind. The sniper in the building across seemed to have noticed the situation. Ducking as low as he could, Kwon Taekjoo sprinted toward the wall where the sniper's rifle was positioned. A hail of bullets rained down on him as he advanced. After narrowly dodging each shot, he slid to the wall and launched his counterattack. Soon, the torrent of bullets aimed at him ceased. Kwon Taekjoo hadn't aimed precisely, but it seemed he'd managed a lucky shot.

With the sniper rifle in hand, Kwon Taekjoo scanned the rooftops of nearby buildings through the scope. Suddenly, he felt a chill at the back of his head—a sense of panic. He

swung around with the rifle, but the sniper he had in his sights was already aiming right at him. Just as Kwon Taekjoo realized it was too late, the sniper collapsed abruptly, taken down by another shooter. Kwon Taekjoo moved the rifle from side to side, trying to locate the person who had fired the shot. But the silhouette that had just saved him lingered in his line of sight for only a moment before vanishing like a wisp of smoke.

Zhenya?

No, it couldn't be. The aura felt different. Kwon Taekjoo was sure of that, even though he'd only seen them for a fraction of a second and from far away. But if it wasn't Zhenya, then who was it?

He didn't have much time to ponder it, because a bullet shattered the railing in front of him. Kwon Taekjoo quickly swung his rifle in the opposite direction, aiming at the source of the shot, but saw the sniper standing there in full view. It was an act bordering on suicidal. Kwon Taekjoo frowned, ready to pull the trigger. Strangely enough, he could've sworn he locked eyes with the sniper through his scope. The way he slowly shook his head seemed ominous.

"... What the hell?"

["G1, we have reports of an explosion at the location. Police units are en route. We need your status."]

"Later."

Kwon Taekjoo postponed his report, picking up the communicator from the unconscious sniper beside him and placing it in his ear. Each time the sniper in the other building moved his lips, words in Persian echoed through his earpiece.

["Panj, chahar, se, do, yek."]

It was a countdown. Kwon Taekjoo frowned and looked back at the sniper, who had climbed onto the railing and shouted a final word before jumping to his death.

["Inshallah."]

As his last words echoed in the communicator, a thunderous noise erupted from below. As if on cue, dozens of drones shot up into the sky.

"... What?"

The drones moved in perfect unison in one direction... toward the route where the Russian and Iranian delegations were traveling. It couldn't be. As a deep sense of dread seized his mind, a series of massive explosions shook the city. The intense shock waves reverberated through the ground beneath his feet.

Suddenly, the whole city fell silent. Kwon Taekjoo's head began to spin. The only proof that time hadn't stopped—and that the scene before him was real—was the sight of dark columns of smoke spiraling up from the main road.

The police vehicles patrolling nearby alleys immediately turned toward the site of the explosion. Meanwhile, pedestrians clung to the edges of the sidewalks, casting anxious glances in all directions.

Kwon Taekjoo, who had instinctively ducked upon hearing the explosions, quickly checked his target's status. However, there was no marker on his map.

"Damn it, what the hell is going on?"

["G1, an explosion of unknown origin was detected near the target. Suspected terrorist attack."]

"… A terrorist attack?"

It didn't matter who was behind it or why. Kwon Taekjoo's crowded mind focused on one thought… he needed to locate his target.

Kwon Taekjoo quickly descended from the rooftop and rechecked the location of his target.

"Where is the target now?"

["Unable to confirm location at this time. Please verify the target's position."]

"Damn it…"

Kwon Taekjoo stood by the elevator and impatiently pressed the down button, making the descent feel like an eternity.

He was about to look for another elevator when he noticed something unusual. Both elevators in service were heading up to the top floor. It was likely the police had arrived, responding to the explosions and gunfire on the rooftop. At this rate, Kwon Taekjoo would easily become the prime suspect in the terrorist attack.

"Support team, I need reinforcements."

A moment later, both elevators stopped. Kwon Taekjoo took this chance to sprint to the emergency stairwell, jumping down several steps at a time. Using his momentum, he jumped onto the railing, sliding downwards.

Kwon Taekjoo had just reached the lower floor when the emergency stairwell door burst open, revealing two guards.

"Freeze!"

Kwon Taekjoo ignored the command, leaping to the opposite wall and kicking off it to deliver a powerful kick to the face of the guard charging toward him. Then, he hooked his leg around the other guard's leg, pulling him down, and followed up with a punch. After subduing both guards with ease, he grabbed their radios and spoke into them.

"Emergency stairwell, all clear."

Then he pushed through the door and made his way outside as if nothing had happened. The lobby was completely empty, likely evacuated for safety.

Kwon Taekjoo crossed the lobby and got into his vehicle, which was still parked by the entrance. As soon as he started the engine, he sped toward the main road, the source of the explosions and gunfire.

The unexpected terror attack had thrown the roads into chaos. Traffic lights were useless, and cars were scattered across multiple lanes, some even crossing the median. Numerous people abandoned their vehicles in panic, fleeing on foot. Kwon Taekjoo honked irritably as pedestrians darted recklessly in front of his car.

"Get out of the way! Ugh, they're putting themselves at risk. Let me through!"

The military police guarding the perimeter were equally disoriented, unable to tell friend from foe. They seemed unsure where to focus, as if any semblance of control had vanished.

In their defense, there were injured victims everywhere. As the black smoke began to partially clear, Kwon Taekjoo could see multiple bodies lying in the streets. Among them were government agents assigned to security protocol, as well as ordinary civilians. Screams and cries of distress echoed from all directions. The air was thick with the smell of gunpowder, molten metal, and blood, making it hard to breathe. It was a hellish scene.

"Damn it, where is Park Jeong-ho?"

The site of the terrorist attack was even more horrific. The explosions had shattered the barricades, scattering debris along the street. The roads were filled with abandoned vehicles, many riddled with bullets or burning down to their frames. The pavement, once smooth, was now marked by deep craters and scorch marks. Human remains and twisted metal littered the area.

Gunfire still echoed nearby. Apparently, the Iranian special forces were locked in an intense battle with the terrorists. Overhead, drones swarmed in endless clusters. There were too many for simple reconnaissance. Just as Kwon Taekjoo had feared, one of them dove toward the battlefield and erupted in a violent explosion.

At this rate, would the delegations of both countries survive? And what would happen to Park Jeong-ho?

But amidst the chaos, an exceptionally good piece of news crackled through his communicator.

["G1, target location identified."]

Moments later, Kwon Taekjoo's phone screen displayed the target's position.

Due to the unexpected terror attack, it was likely that all official plans would be canceled. Even the summit conference could be called off, which meant there was a strong chance Park

Jeong-ho would have to return to North Korea. If that happened, Kwon Taekjoo would be heading back with yet another failed mission.

He couldn't let that happen.

There was no way he could bet on another chance when there was no guarantee he'd even get one—and especially when he'd barely been approved for this mission in the first place.

"Support team, we're changing the plan. We need to secure the target now."

["G1, hold position. Repeat, hold in a secure location."]

"We don't have time for that," Kwon Taekjoo muttered irritably, slamming down on the accelerator.

He avoided the main road, where stray projectiles were still flying, and reversed into an alleyway. All the pedestrians had already evacuated the area, so the streets were empty, but abandoned vehicles, motorcycles, baby strollers, and carts were scattered everywhere. Even so, Kwon Taekjoo kept up his speed, maneuvering around the obstacles.

After confirming his target's movement, Kwon Taekjoo jerked the steering wheel, veering into a narrow side street. His rearview mirrors folded back from the tight space between the buildings, but he just clenched his jaw and pressed down on the gas.

Finally, he emerged onto a wider road. The brief relief from the open space was short-lived as he spotted a patrol car parked at the edge. The officers inside looked startled by his sudden appearance, quickly drawing their weapons and aiming at him.

"You! Stop the vehicle!"

"Raise your hands and step out of the car! Don't try anything funny!"

Kwon Taekjoo complied, shutting off the engine and opening the door. He stepped out slowly… or at least pretended to, before tossing a grenade toward them. The officers, caught off guard, yelled in panic.

"It's a grenade!"

"Take cover!"

They threw themselves to the ground, bracing for an explosion. But even after waiting a while, the detonation never came. By the time they realized something was off, Kwon Taekjoo was speeding off into the distance. Their delayed gunfire barely grazed the rear of his car.

How long had he been driving like this?

Finally, the order he'd been waiting for echoed through his communicator.

["G1, plan change approved."]

“Yes! Finally. Took them long enough.”

As soon as approval came, a recommended route lit up on his map. He followed the directions to catch up with his target. Most of the roads were closed, so he had to wind through several alleyways. Meanwhile, a few patrol cars, alerted by their colleagues, began tailing him. They all blared their sirens, threatening to open fire if he didn’t stop.

Kwon Taekjoo ignored the warnings, focusing on tracking his target. The police, having issued their warning, opened fire. A hail of bullets slammed into the back of his car, shattering the rear window. Kwon Taekjoo ducked his head, keeping his foot on the accelerator. With his limited visibility, he lost some control, scraping the car against the side of a building. His right side mirror snapped off completely, and the rear bumper began to drag behind him, hanging by one corner.

“So they want to put me to the test, huh?”

Even amid the relentless barrage, Kwon Taekjoo zoomed in on the map, evaluating the terrain nearby. He was rapidly approaching a dead-end alley. He needed to pull a U-turn on the narrow road before he reached that point, but that meant slowing down to a safer speed. Instead of braking, he pressed harder on the gas, accelerating until he slammed down on the brakes, turning sharply left with expert steering. The force of the maneuver made the passenger side of the car collide with the wall, crushing it inward.

Naturally, his car was in far better shape than the police vehicles behind him. They had been following closely and, without time to react, they crashed into the dead end at full speed. One after another, more patrol cars piled up in a chain reaction, blocking the alley.

Kwon Taekjoo clenched his fist. But it was still too early to feel relieved. Above him, the sound of a rotating propeller grew louder. A police helicopter had appeared.

“Suspect vehicle, stop immediately. If you don’t comply, we will open fire.”

“Would you stop if you were me?”

As Kwon Taekjoo ignored their orders and continued to speed ahead, they opened fire on him without hesitation. Instantly, the roof of his car was riddled with deep bullet holes. The windows shattered, and even the seats were torn apart, spilling their stuffing everywhere.

“Damn it. They really want me dead.”

Kwon Taekjoo had no choice but to abandon his original route. The alley he turned into to avoid the helicopter led straight to a bazaar. He honked his horn repeatedly and barreled through the market. Shouts erupted at his sudden appearance as people scrambled into their stalls. The helicopter stopped firing and repositioned itself at the bazaar exit he would eventually take. They were likely worried about precision due to the market's roof and wanted to avoid civilian casualties.

Navigating through the bazaar was like diving straight into the jaws of an alligator. Kwon Taekjoo quickly scanned his map, honked his horn, and aimed straight for a particular stall.

At the same time, he threw a grenade through what was left of his shattered windshield. It exploded on impact, creating a small hole in the wall. Cracks spread outward from the point of impact. Gritting his teeth, he pressed the accelerator to the floor.

"Aaah!"

With a loud crash, his car slammed into the wall, which crumbled to the ground. Debris scattered across the hood and roof of his car. Both the front and top of the vehicle were crushed and battered, looking worse than ever. It was almost miraculous that it was still running.

But by breaking through the wall, he had managed to shake off the helicopter, and Kwon Taekjoo had closed the gap between himself and his target. He stared intently at the blinking marker on his navigation system as he continued speeding ahead.

Soon, he was right on his target's tail on an overpass. He had practically caught up. But just as he thought this, something unexpected threw him off. His target suddenly veered down a ramp, making a sharp turn onto the road below the overpass. Were they trying to shake him?

Whatever the reason, if he let them slip away now, he'd only end up farther behind—and who knew how long it would take to catch up again? As Kwon Taekjoo debated his next move, his target passed directly underneath him, heading in the opposite direction.

"Calm down. Since when have you cared this much about your own safety?" he muttered under his breath, chiding himself.

Then, he made a hard turn toward the side barrier and, with a fierce yell, slammed the accelerator as hard as he could. His car crashed through the guardrail and plummeted nearly five stories. With a deafening crash, the airbags deployed.

The impact jarred his entire body, but he didn't have time to process the pain. He grabbed a knife from his ankle holster and sliced through the airbag, freeing his chest from the crushing pressure and allowing him to breathe properly.

"Ugh, damn it. At this rate, I really am going to die."

Kwon Taekjoo struggled to steady himself and checked his target's position again. The blinking dot on the map was practically on top of his own. It made sense… he'd crashed directly onto one of the armored vehicles from the special forces unit escorting his target from behind.

At the sound of the unexpected collision, snipers from the surrounding armored vehicles aimed directly at him. Kwon Taekjoo ducked immediately, avoiding the hail of bullets, and scrambled into the back seat. There, he pulled out a rocket launcher he had stashed earlier and fired.

When the rocket exploded, two armored vehicles were launched into the air. The vehicle carrying his target narrowly avoided crashing into the overturned vehicles, darting into a

nearby alley on the left. The armored vehicle Kwon Taekjoo had landed on took off in pursuit, dragging him along with it.

The sharp turn caused his car to tilt violently, wedging itself between the wall and the armored vehicle. Kwon Taekjoo was tossed around inside like a ragdoll from the force. Sparks flew as his car continued to be dragged, screeching against the wall. At any moment, the vehicle could go up in flames, or he could end up crushed along with it. Either way, he needed to find a way out—fast.

Kwon Taekjoo crawled out of the rear window, smashing the side mirror of the armored vehicle. After taking a moment to stabilize himself, he leapt onto the armored vehicle.

“Aaah!”

A second later, his own car was completely crushed, as if it were nothing but a tin can. If he’d hesitated even a second longer, he would have died alongside it.

Without even a chance to catch his breath, Kwon Taekjoo clambered along the roof of the armored vehicle toward the driver’s seat. He fired several shots at the window, but the bulletproof glass held firm, cracking with white fractures under his relentless assault. He slammed his rifle against the weakened glass, landing a powerful blow on the driver’s head, who immediately fell unconscious as the vehicle veered sharply to the left.

“Mind giving me a lift?” he muttered dryly, forcing his way into the driver’s seat. Gripping the wheel himself, he accelerated even faster, hot on the heels of the escaping vehicles.

Only two cars remained from the Russian delegation. It wasn’t clear if they’d split up for protection after the terror attack or if these were the sole survivors. Both vehicles were so battered that it was a miracle they were still moving. It was hard to tell Park Jeong-ho’s current condition, but if he was already dead, Kwon Taekjoo needed at least to verify the body.

He slammed down on the gas, reaching top speed. The other vehicles attempting to escape down the alley soon found themselves trapped in a dead end. Kwon Taekjoo didn’t slow down, ramming into the rear of the last vehicle. He kept pushing forward, even slamming into the one in front. Crushed from both ends, the two cars were wedged between his armored vehicle and the wall, unable to move an inch. Their wheels spun uselessly against the ground.

When all movement had finally settled, Kwon Taekjoo got out of his car and headed toward the Russian delegation’s vehicle. At some point, the blood dripping from his forehead had reached the corner of his eye, tinting his vision—and his special lens—a deep red. He wiped it away carelessly and first checked the vehicle at the rear. All the passengers were slumped over. Even the driver seemed to have lost consciousness from his severe bullet wounds. Kwon Taekjoo carefully inspected each of their faces one by one. His gaze soon fell upon a man collapsed in the back seat. It was Bazim.

Clicking his tongue, he circled the vehicle and opened the rear door to check Bazim's pulse. He was alive, but his heart was racing, pounding too fast.

The moment Kwon Taekjoo realized something was off, a cold gun barrel pressed against his chest. Bazim's eyes snapped open. Kwon Taekjoo raised his hands compliantly and took a step back. Bazim cautiously stepped out of the car, keeping his aim steady. Standing in front of him, Bazim tore off the broken synthetic mask covering Kwon Taekjoo's face. A disbelieving laugh escaped his mouth.

"Hah, so it's you again? That Korean spy."

"Believe me, the feeling's mutual. Did you really think I'd grow fond of you just because we keep meeting?"

"As if you would... Were you behind the earlier terrorist attack?"

"Of course not. What could we possibly gain from something like that?"

"Then why are you here?"

"Hmm, I don't know. That's a pretty personal question, don't you think?" Kwon Taekjoo replied indifferently.

Bazim immediately frowned at his bold response, pressing his gun firmly against his neck.

"You're always sticking your nose in my business."

"Do you think I want to? Maybe you should stop doing such horrible things first. Is arrogance a family trait?"

"You're awfully talkative for someone about to die." Bazim tensed his finger on the trigger, his lips curling into a smile. *"You've been a nuisance long enough. Goodbye."*

Bazim's low laugh sounded strangely breathless. Kwon Taekjoo noticed that Bazim's left side was soaked with blood. It looked like a gunshot wound. Judging by his disoriented eyes, Bazim was in poor condition, yet he stubbornly continued to threaten Kwon Taekjoo.

Suddenly, Kwon Taekjoo shifted his gaze beyond Bazim, causing him to hesitate for a split second. Kwon Taekjoo seized the moment, slamming his hands upward. Bazim pulled the trigger, firing a shot into the air. In the same motion, Kwon Taekjoo twisted Bazim's arm behind him, caught the falling pistol, and fired in a specific direction. A drone flying overhead behind Bazim burst into a violent explosion. Kwon Taekjoo pulled Bazim close, shielding him from the falling debris.

Kwon Taekjoo's ears rang from the explosion. He shook his head, trying to dispel the dizziness. It seemed there were still some drones left from the previous terrorist attack. Kwon Taekjoo needed to act quickly.

He grabbed the back of Bazim's jacket and tore it off.

"Let go of me! What are you...?"

"Look, I doubt that bastard would even mourn your pathetic death…"

He pressed the torn jacket against Bazim's wound to stem the bleeding, then unfastened Bazim's belt and wrapped it tightly to secure the makeshift bandage.

"...Ugh."

"But for once in your life, you should reap the benefits of having a brother who is actually worth it."

As soon as Kwon Taekjoo finished tending to Bazim's wound, he pushed him away.

"If you go back this way and head about 200 meters, you'll find Iranian authorities patrolling. Go to them, identify yourself, and beg them to help you. If you want to."

"……"

"Of course, if you don't, you can always stay here and end up as another casualty of the terrorist attack. Doesn't look like you'll last much longer either way."

He nodded toward Bazim's blood-soaked pants before tossing the pistol back to him. The magazine was empty, but it was still better than nothing.

Bazim gave Kwon Taekjoo a look of disbelief, as if he couldn't understand why he was sparing his life, then began to back away slowly. Ever distrustful, he stayed on high alert for a long time. Kwon Taekjoo watched him and then remarked, *"Hey, I hear sirens."* That was when Bazim finally hobbled away, heading in the direction he'd been shown.

Shaking his head, Kwon Taekjoo refocused on his true objective. He approached the vehicle where Park Jeong-ho was supposed to be and pulled on the crushed, immobile door with all his strength until he finally managed to rip it off entirely. Inside, Park Jeong-ho was curled up, clutching his head and trembling uncontrollably. The driver and the other agents surrounding him were already dead.

"I'm here to escort you to safety, Dr. Park."

Park Jeong-ho flinched at the sudden sound of the Korean language, his body going rigid. Slowly, he looked up to meet Kwon Taekjoo's calm gaze.

"You're not hurt anywhere, are you?"

"Were—were you sent from South Korea...?"

"Yes. I was that 'cockroach' in Vladivostok. We don't have time for formalities, so let's get moving for now. As for our transport…"

Kwon Taekjoo scanned the area and nodded toward an armored vehicle behind them.

"That one will do. Do you think you can move?"

Park Jeong-ho nodded slowly and took Kwon Taekjoo's hand. For someone who had just endured a violent car chase, he didn't seem to have any major injuries.

“What the hell is going on?”

“We’re still figuring it out. It seems there was a terrorist attack unrelated to our operation. We can talk it over as we make our escape.”

“Ahh...!”

Park Jeong-ho yelped as he climbed into the armored vehicle, startled by the sight of bloodied, unconscious agents inside. Unfazed, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed them by the collars and dragged them out of the vehicle before saying, “You can get in now.” Park Jeong-ho looked unsettled by Kwon Taekjoo’s indifference to human lives. The nervous glances he shot at Kwon Taekjoo, even as he climbed into the passenger seat, revealed his uncertainty about trusting him.

Kwon Taekjoo paid him no mind and quickly backed out of the alley.

“Due to an unexpected terrorist attack, our plans have changed. We haven’t yet identified the main perpetrators, but we’ve decided it’s safer for you to be evacuated now that everyone is caught up in the chaos. North Korea will likely assume you vanished in the terrorist attack.”

“T-Then, what about my family?”

“North Korea will be too busy investigating the truth behind the recent terrorist attack, so surveillance on your family will actually be more relaxed than usual. For now, focus on one thing: you need to get back safely to reunite with your family. I’ll take you to the South Korean embassy as planned.”

As Kwon Taekjoo put on the headset connected to his communicator, he warned, “Hold on tight.” Live updates on ongoing skirmishes and restricted areas streamed directly into his communicator. He sped down the road, skillfully avoiding danger zones.

However, before long, all routes were blocked. Without sufficient firepower, Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t risk a confrontation, especially with Park Jeong-ho at his side. After a moment’s deliberation, Kwon Taekjoo made a swift decision.

“Looks like going underground will be faster.”

“What did you just say? Aaahhh!”

The armored vehicle, already speeding at a breakneck pace, hurtled toward the metro entrance. Each step of the staircase sent the heavy vehicle bouncing violently from side to side. It wouldn’t be surprising if it ended up flipping over. Park Jeong-ho gripped his seatbelt with both hands and shut his eyes, a low, terrified whimper escaping his lips.

Due to the terrorist attack, all metro operations had been suspended, and the station was completely empty. Kwon Taekjoo sped across the length of the station, heading directly toward the farthest exit. Workers attempting to block the exit scattered as the armored vehicle climbed the stairs. Police vehicles stationed nearby to prevent pedestrian access quickly

turned on their sirens and pursued them. When Kwon Taekjoo ignored their commands to stop, they opened fire without hesitation, riddling the vehicle with bullets.

“For god’s sake, at this rate, they’re going to catch us!”

“Hang on tight.”

With every alley they tore through, more police vehicles joined the chase, responding to calls for backup. Soon enough, even a helicopter was hovering above. They were being cornered from all directions, even in the air—a true predicament.

In a swift move, Kwon Taekjoo jerked the wheel. Amidst the spinning view, he spotted a “No Entry” sign. The road ahead was clearly too narrow for any car to pass, but he had no other choice. Extending his arm to shield Park Jeong-ho, he slammed his foot on the accelerator.

“Brace yourself—it’s about to get rough.”

“Aahhhh!”

The armored vehicle scraped against the buildings on either side, tearing off the side mirrors.

Since the road was just barely wide enough for a single car, the police vehicles had to follow them in a single file. No matter how much they fired at Kwon Taekjoo from behind, the armor held firm. And with the police so close, the helicopter above couldn’t risk firing its machine gun.

The only problem was that if the other end of the road was blocked, they’d be like rats in a trap. Just as he feared, more police cars appeared at the far end, responding to backup calls.

Right now, their only chance was to go underground. Kwon Taekjoo scanned the street for an accessible manhole as police closed in from both sides.

He halted the vehicle, quickly considering his options. Was there really no way out? Should he let himself get caught and look for a way to escape later? But what about Park Jeong-ho?

While Kwon Taekjoo weighed his choices, the unmistakable roar of a motorcycle engine sounded in the distance. He turned toward the noise to see a motorcycle speeding toward them on a path just wide enough for a bicycle, approaching from the passenger side. The rider wore a helmet, making it impossible to see their face. Instinctively, Kwon Taekjoo drew his gun, cautiously aiming at the approaching motorcycle.

But, for some reason, the rider didn’t try to attack. Instead, they made a hand signal to Kwon Taekjoo, whose eyes widened in response. He instantly recognized the gesture—it was a distinctive hand signal he had learned long ago during his time in the specialized military unit, long before working for the NIS.

Earlier, when someone had taken out the sniper on the hotel rooftop, Kwon Taekjoo realized someone had been covering him. At the time, he wondered if it was Zhenya.

But now he considered that it was likely a Plan B agent sent by the NIS. After all, if they had suggested directly that he work with a partner, he would have flatly refused. The agent's assignment was probably to clear any obstacles to ensure the mission's success. There was no doubt that Kwon Taekjoo himself was considered one of those "obstacles," as they still suspected he might betray them.

"They really don't trust me, do they?" Kwon Taekjoo muttered to himself, turning his head away from Park Jeong-ho.

He then fired a burst of bullets into the passenger window. The approaching agent shot simultaneously, shattering the glass into a spray of white shards. Park Jeong-ho, who had no idea what was happening, clutched his head and screamed. Kwon Taekjoo grabbed him by the collar and issued a firm command.

"Dr. Park, listen carefully. You need to evacuate with that man over there."

"What? Who is he…?"

"He's an agent with us. He'll get you safely to the embassy."

"T-Then what about you?"

"I'll finish things up here and follow right after. We don't have time," Kwon Taekjoo said, unfastening Park Jeong-ho's seatbelt and giving him a firm push forward.

With a stunned expression, Park Jeong-ho slid through the narrow gap in the shattered window as the Plan B agent helped him out.

Meanwhile, police cars surrounding them rammed the armored vehicle from front and back, trying to pin down Kwon Taekjoo. Above, the helicopter blared commands for surrender, firing warning shots. Kwon Taekjoo swerved the vehicle toward the side road, clearing a path for the motorcycle agent.

"Go!"

The agent helped Park Jeong-ho onto the motorcycle, equipped with a sidecar, and swiftly sped off down the side road. Moments later, a storm of bullets struck Kwon Taekjoo's armored vehicle. With the helicopter's machine gun, holes began tearing through the roof in rapid succession.

In some ways, this was Kwon Taekjoo's last real chance to escape. But if he fled now, he couldn't guarantee Park Jeong-ho's safety. He had to buy them more time. This was the only way to make up for his past mistakes and complete the mission. Only then could Zhenya be freed from the espionage charges.

"Ahhhh!"

After a fierce shout, he clenched his jaw. The heavier the assault raining down on him, the more he forced his vehicle to block the road completely.

How long had he been holding out?

Suddenly, the helicopter's attack ceased. When Kwon Taekjoo looked up, he saw several drones hovering near the helicopter, which was maneuvering frantically to avoid them. The police below watched in alarm, concerned the drones might explode.

Kwon Taekjoo raised his rifle and shot the drones down one by one, hitting each with precision. The damaged drones collided with the helicopter, causing a massive explosion. The rotor and fuselage of the helicopter disintegrated instantly, sending debris crashing down.

The surrounding police vehicles were caught in the wreckage, igniting one after another in a violent chain reaction of explosions. Massive flames erupted down the alley, surging rapidly toward Kwon Taekjoo before he could even blink.

For a fraction of a second, memories of the past flooded his mind. His family, once ordinary. His father, who left for work one morning and never returned. His brother, who left for the last time after asking Kwon Taekjoo to look after their mother. His mother, always worrying over him. The day he graduated high school, just like everyone else. His first day of college. The moment he joined the special forces during his military service. The day he was recruited by the NIS. And finally, his unexpected encounter with Zhenya on a mission he had reluctantly accepted.

Moments later, a massive shockwave rocked the ground beneath him. Kwon Taekjoo's vision quickly sank into darkness.

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Chapter End Notes

Support the author by purchasing the novel on Ridibooks.

The Patriot

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•PERSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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‘Zhenya.’

The skin under his eyes tightened, and the fine hairs on his ears stood on end.

‘Zhenya.’

The sound of the gentle voice calmed his heightened senses, and the tension in his face eased. A rough hand brushed his ear, massaging it softly. He let out a quiet moan, instinctively wrapping his arms around the figure beside him, craving more of that delicate, subtle pleasure. His cheek brushed against the muscular thigh next to him. A deep chuckle came from the man. Zhenya loved the way the air vibrated with his laughter, the warm sound resonating in his ears.

‘Idiot. Stop acting like a baby and get up already. It's noon.’

Even his annoyed scolding felt sweet to Zhenya. He'd never let anyone speak to him like this before, but for some reason, he craved it when it came to Kwon Taekjoo. He wanted so much more, wanted him to invade his space at will.

‘Agh, idiot. I know you're pretending not to hear me. Have you eaten yet?’

Zhenya shook his head instead of answering. He was afraid of ruining the gentle moment by speaking, though he had no real reason to.

‘I figured as much. Ugh, lift your head already. I'll make you the black bean noodles you like. You're a big man, but you still don’t feed yourself well, and you have the appetite of a kid.’

The man shook his leg, nudging Zhenya's head. Zhenya cracked a smile, slowly opening his eyes.

"....."

He reached for the empty space beside him, but it was cold, as if no one had been there. With a deep sigh, he sat up.

He must have fallen asleep studying the blueprints again. After four days without rest, he'd pretty much passed out.

Whenever his mind became overwhelmed with thoughts that distracted him, Zhenya would retreat to his "island" and immerse himself in studying his weapons, just as he was now. To bring his creations to life, he needed precise calculations and great skill, so he would clear his mind of everything else until he achieved a satisfying result.

But lately, even that had become hard. It usually happened after arguing with Kwon Taekjoo. No matter how much he tried to block it out, unanswered questions crowded his mind. And they always circled back to the same thing... why was Kwon Taekjoo angry, and what had he done wrong this time?

Why? Why, exactly?

The questions piled up, turning his thoughts into a tangled mess. There hadn't been a single problem in his life he couldn't solve. He always found an answer, one way or another, and if not, he'd eliminate the problem entirely. Even when his mind got caught up in complex thoughts, all he had to do was shut them out forever.

But that approach never worked with Kwon Taekjoo. The questions about him never went anywhere, and he couldn't erase him from his mind. Maybe that was why Zhenya felt angrier and more frustrated than ever.

With a soft click of his tongue, he opened the tracking app, as he often did.

"...Hm?"

The only target he was tracking was Kwon Taekjoo, but for some reason, his location wasn't marked on the map. Zhenya restarted the app, but it was the same as before. Only one message appeared on his screen, saying: "The target does not exist."

But that was impossible.

The microchip Zhenya had secretly implanted in Kwon Taekjoo's body should have been constantly detecting his vital signs and transmitting his location to Zhenya in real-time. Unless Kwon Taekjoo was in a no-signal zone or the device had been destroyed, there was no reason for that message to appear.

Zhenya was about to restart the device again when a familiar sound reached his ears. It was the hum of a helicopter in the distance.

‘As soon as I’m done, I’ll come back for you, alright? Zhenya.’

Could it be Kwon Taekjoo? Had he completed his mission already? Maybe that was why he wasn’t showing up on the tracker.

After deactivating the island’s defense systems, Zhenya made his way to the living room. He drew the curtains and looked out the window. A helicopter was approaching from afar. Its pink exterior made him question if it was really Kwon Taekjoo, but then again, entering Russia wouldn’t have been easy for Kwon Taekjoo considering his situation. Maybe he’d gotten help from Olga.

Zhenya headed up to the rooftop. After a while, the helicopter descended slowly, the gusts from the blades rustling his robe. He raised an arm to shield his eyes from the wind, peering intently into the helicopter cabin, but he didn’t see the face he was expecting.

The blades finally stopped, and the door opened. Standing on the other side was Olga, who gave her brother an odd look as he stood on the rooftop.

“What’s gotten into you all of a sudden? You came out personally to greet me? Wow, I’m so moved I might even shed a tear.”

“Are you alone?”

“Who else would I be with? What? Were you that eager to see our father?”

Her nose wrinkled in irritation as she responded sarcastically, pretending not to know who he was really asking about.

“Get lost.”

“So harsh. I just got here. I’m exhausted from the long flight. I need a little rest inside.”

“Go ahead, if you don’t mind that thing being reduced to ashes,” Zhenya replied, casting a frosty glance at the helicopter.

Then he went back inside. Olga followed close behind, unfazed. Her voice was laced with intentional mockery as she walked, as if wanting him to hear.

“There it is—now that’s the ‘Psych’ I know. For a moment, I thought you were on your deathbed, acting so strangely.”

Zhenya didn’t even bother to respond to Olga’s comments. He ignored her, telling himself it wasn’t worth the effort to crush such an annoying insect. She, in turn, didn’t mind his silence.

She headed to the kitchen to set some water boiling for tea. Her eyes stayed glued to the phone in her hand the whole time. From the way he was acting, Olga was sure he was tracking someone again, and it was likely Kwon Taekjoo. They made a dream pair... one openly stalking his partner while the other found it adorable.

Shaking her head, Olga moved to the dining table. *"I want milk tea,"* she called out as Zhenya began pouring tea. Ignoring her, he prepared only a cup of black tea for himself and sat down. His eyes stayed fixed on his phone, even as he sipped his hot tea.

"The outside world is pure chaos, and here you are, living happily ever after now that you're dating. It must be nice to live like that."

Though she provoked him on purpose, Zhenya didn't even blink. He'd always treated those around him as if they were invisible. She still marveled at how a man like him could completely change his behavior in front of Kwon Taekjoo or their mother.

While Olga fetched milk from the fridge, she murmured under her breath, *"Or are you sulking, getting a silent punishment after your lover scolded you?"*

"What do you mean?"

At the mention of Kwon Taekjoo, Zhenya's response was immediate. A broad smile tugged at the corners of Olga's lips. She moved lightly to the table and took a seat across from him.

"You two fought, didn't you?"

"I asked what you meant."

Zhenya's expression turned cold, a clear warning that he wouldn't ask politely again. Olga shrugged and answered in an indifferent tone.

"Taekjoo called me. He asked me to check in on you."

"Did he?"

"Why else would I be here? He was practically begging, so I figured you two had one of your explosive fights again. I came to help patch things up, but it seems I came for nothing, considering how you've been ignoring me."

"... Did he say anything else?"

"Who knows?" Olga replied dismissively, as she slid her black tea across the table and poured milk in, transforming it into milk tea. Her refined tastes demanded that anything she consumed carry an aroma of the highest quality.

She sipped her tea, unfazed by the icy glare Zhenya threw her way. As she toyed with the cup in her hands, she examined her brother.

"Honestly, why does Taekjoo even like you? Two years is more than enough time for his 'honeymoon phase' to be over."

Olga's gaze was meticulous and probing, yet it lacked any malice. Her eyes showed only genuine curiosity.

"I can't believe he worries about you, of all people."

She shook her head as though the very thought was absurd. The carefree way she'd stolen his tea and thrown cutting remarks should have irritated him, but Zhenya didn't react in the slightest. The dark, threatening aura that had been building around him seemed to ease. His feelings of frustration had calmed somewhat upon hearing that Kwon Taekjoo was concerned about him.

He must have wanted to know more, as he got up and made himself another cup of black tea. His unhurried movements were wearing on Olga's patience when she suddenly let out a soft *"Oh."*

"By the way, Bazim is safe and sound. I have to say, the men in our family are truly blessed with resilient lives."

"Bazim?"

Zhenya turned with a frown, wondering why she would disrupt the pleasant news by bringing up Bazim.

"Didn't you know? He accompanied the president to Iran."

Iran. That was the last place where he'd tracked Kwon Taekjoo. Could Kwon Taekjoo's mission be connected to Bazim's work? Was that why Kwon Taekjoo had insisted Zhenya stay out of it this time? And what did Olga mean by Bazim being safe? A sense of unease started creeping over him.

"There was apparently a large terrorist explosion in Tehran," Olga continued, her tone light and casual.

Zhenya sprang to his feet, his hand gripping her collar with such force that Olga was instantly yanked from her seat. She let out a startled cry, half-dragged across the table. Her body dangled awkwardly, barely balanced on her tiptoes.

"You psychotic lunatic! What do you think you're doing?!"

"A large explosion caused by terrorists? What are you talking about?"

"Ugh, let go of me!"

Olga pounded his arm repeatedly, trying to free herself from his grip, but it was useless. Without hesitation, she drew a gun and pointed it straight at Zhenya's forehead. Zhenya didn't even flinch. His icy blue eyes locked onto hers, veins pulsing in his dilated pupils. The frigid rage in his gaze was sharp enough to stab.

"I asked you—what are you talking about?!" he roared.

Olga's breathing turned ragged, her throat tightening under the choking pressure of his hold. Gasping for air, she tried to pull the trigger, but before she could, Zhenya struck her hand, knocking the gun from her grip. The gun fired as it fell, shattering the chandelier above them.

Zhenya didn't even flinch, keeping his gaze fixed on Olga. His pupils narrowed tightly, and every hair on his body stood on end, even more than if he'd encountered a hidden beast in the wild. Olga struggled to speak, her voice barely a rasp.

"Ugh, there were multiple simultaneous terrorist attacks recently in Tehran. Agh, they still don't know if any of the presidents were the target, what the purpose was… haa, or who was behind it. The country is… ugh, under a national state of emergency, so it's been difficult to reach anyone there… I barely got any information about Bazim while I was on my way here, too. That's all I know!"

Zhenya threw Olga out of his reach. Now on the floor, Olga clutched her reddened neck and coughed violently for a long while. Even as she gasped in pain, she muttered, "Damn bastard," with resentment. After several minutes, she finally regained control, glaring up at Zhenya but staying still. He stood there, looking stunned.

"Taekjoo…"

The way Zhenya said his name—distant and uneven—felt all wrong. A feeling of dread overtook Olga as a thought crossed her mind: Don't tell me…

"What? What is it? Was Taekjoo there, too? Can't you get in touch with him?"

Zhenya didn't respond, and Olga's worry only grew.

"Taekjoo's safe, right? You've always kept track of him. Where is he now? Have you checked?" she demanded, shaking his leg urgently. But her voice didn't seem to reach him at all.

Zhenya stood there like a broken machine, frozen, before suddenly grabbing his phone. He restarted the tracking system over and over, trying to find any trace of Kwon Taekjoo, but each attempt returned the same message: *"The target does not exist."*

In frustration, he threw the phone. Olga hurried to pick it up, quickly noticing the blank coordinates where Kwon Taekjoo's signal had vanished. Below, it showed his last recorded location: Iran, Tehran. It was, in fact, the exact site of the terrorist attack.

"No… this can't be right. It must be wrong… right?"

Olga shook her head, refusing to accept the reality. She looked desperately to Zhenya for reassurance, clinging to a last hope, but he remained silent, his hand covering his eyes.

"It can't be," she whispered, restarting the tracking app. But no matter how many times she tried, she couldn't find a new signal. Her hands trembled, and her breath came in ragged gasps, a sob breaking through.

Suddenly, Zhenya grabbed the phone from her hands and stormed off without a word. Just before he left, Olga caught a glimpse of his eyes, now burning with a strange, murderous light.

“Hey! Where are you going?” she yelled after him. But her words once again didn’t reach him. Zhenya was already gone, and nothing seemed capable of stopping him now.

After the terrorist attack in Tehran, the NIS had also entered a state of emergency. The atmosphere at headquarters was tenser than usual. Globally, the international community was on high alert, as the attack had occurred just before the trilateral summit between Iran, Russia, and Turkey.

Since Iran declared a national state of emergency, communications and transportation were severely restricted, and inspection measures had tightened considerably. Government agencies worldwide responded swiftly to any updates but remained low-profile, wary of being drawn into the incident.

There was widespread speculation over who had orchestrated the attack. The BBC claimed it was the work of an armed opposition group against the Iranian government, while France’s AFP reported that a Kurdish militant group was responsible, citing a government official. CNN suggested that ISIS might have been behind the attack, referring to their recent suspicious activities. Meanwhile, an Iranian state media outlet dared to allege that the United States secretly funded the attack, discontented with Iran's close ties with Russia. The already tense international situation escalated dramatically.

The full extent of the damage from the attack remained unclear. Reports only confirmed that both presidents had escaped unharmed, though their entourages and security personnel had suffered numerous casualties, with many still missing. Since drones carried out the bombings, recovering intact bodies and identifying victims would be extremely difficult.

The NIS itself had to act cautiously in its communications with agents on the ground. The fact that they had been conducting a mission at the exact time and place of the attack could easily raise unjustified suspicions against them.

For now, two facts were certain: First, Park Jeong-ho's family had managed to defect from North Korea amid the chaos in Tehran and were now in Thailand; second, the agent assigned to support Kwon Taekjoo, known as P2, had managed to extract Park Jeong-ho from Kwon Taekjoo’s custody and escort him to the embassy.

Kwon Taekjoo's status remained unknown. It was confirmed that a series of drone bombings had completely destroyed the area where he was last located. Very few survivors had been pulled from the rubble, and those rescued were found unconscious.

A week had passed since then. The chip embedded in all undercover agents had not transmitted any vital signals. In most cases, this meant the agents were presumed dead.

But among all of them, could Kwon Taekjoo… truly be dead? It was unthinkable.

Director Kwak rubbed his throbbing temples, glancing at the latest updates from the field. There hadn’t been any new information in hours. Kwon Taekjoo could possibly be among the unidentified and unconscious survivors. Director Kwak clung to the hope that the chaotic situation was delaying crucial information.

How long had he been waiting like this?

Suddenly, a knock echoed through his door. He looked up and said, “Come in.” His secretary entered without delay.

“Sir, we received news from the embassy on site.”

“What did they say?”

“Most of the news concerns Park Jeong-ho. He’s currently receiving medical care and resting at the embassy. However, his gunshot wounds were deeper than expected, so even after rehabilitation, he may suffer permanent disabilities. They plan to keep him under protection until he’s mobile, then send him to his asylum country with Turkey’s help once his new identity is ready.”

“And have they decided on the destination?”

“Yes. He requested Switzerland.”

“Really? Alright, we’ll need to get the paperwork in order. What about the shipment we were trying to secure?”

“They’ve managed to retrieve it and are looking for a safe way to bring it back. According to Park Jeong-ho, it’s a microorganism from the volcanic region of Mount Baekdu. Inhaling it triggers a severe inflammatory response that can kill the host within hours. It’s immune to any known treatment and spreads rapidly, which seems to have caught Russia’s interest.”

Were they planning to develop a highly lethal, invisible weapon? It was clear they had considered the potential for amassing a fortune or disrupting the balance of world power.

All of this matched the intelligence provided by Kwon Taekjoo, whose source was reportedly the Russian ambassador. This confirmed that Ambassador Bogdanov was not aligned with his country’s or his family’s agendas.

“Everything has gone smoothly, then.”

But even as he said that, Director Kwak couldn’t fully relax—he still hadn’t received the one piece of news he truly needed.

“Have we still not located G1? Is there no unidentified Asian man among the injured or dead?”

“No, sir. They’ve searched the area and nearby hospitals from G1’s last known position, but there’s been no progress. No one remotely matches his description, let alone an Asian man.”

The secretary hesitated before carefully asking his opinion. “Sir… Agent G1 only has one immediate family member, his mother. She’s currently in Canada. Should we inform her of his disappearance?”

"… For now, let's focus on finding a body. If G1 is truly dead, we owe it to his mother to return his remains. I'll reach out to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for assistance. Mobilize everyone you can to locate him."

"Yes, sir."

The secretary withdrew silently, closing the door behind him. Director Kwak sank heavily into his chair, releasing a deep sigh.

According to Agent P2's report, Kwon Taekjoo had stayed on-site until the very last moment. A seasoned professional like him could have pulled out at a reasonable time, but he insisted on pressing forward, putting the mission above his own safety. Was it arrogance, a belief that he could survive anything? Or was it patriotism? A sense of justice? If it wasn't any of those, then...

'Can't you at least give me a chance to explain myself?'

'I was pulled from the operation under suspicion, accused of things I never did. It feels like all my years of work have been thrown away. How long will I be under probation? If I keep waiting, will anyone ever clear my name?'

'The fate of this country is at stake. We can't afford to worry about your personal honor…'

'If we lose even our honor, what else do we have in this line of work?'

"....."

Kwon Taekjoo had said he wanted a chance to explain himself after failing his last mission in Vladivostok and being accused of conspiring with the Russian ambassador. He would have done anything to prove his innocence and set things right.

But that wasn't all.

"I have a favor to ask, sir."

Before heading to Iran, Kwon Taekjoo had made a single request. All agents understood they couldn't expect any additional compensation for completing their missions. The director knew that Kwon Taekjoo was fully aware of this, so his sudden request had caught him off guard.

"A favor?"

"Yes. Once this mission is over, I…"

Perhaps his request stemmed from disappointment with the NIS. Had he suddenly felt an emptiness about the fate of an intelligence agent, whose life was entirely devoted to the nation?

Director Kwak was reflecting on Kwon Taekjoo's request when a commotion erupted outside his office door. A familiar voice shouted, "Director!" followed by his secretary, who was

trying to hold back the intruder. Amid the struggle of someone trying to barge into his office while another tried to restrain him, there was a loud crash, followed by the sound of something hitting the floor. Director Kwak stood up and went outside to assess the situation.

The person who had burst into his office was none other than Yoon Jongwoo. His eyes were swollen from crying, and his face was streaked with tears. The director knew well that Kwon Taekjoo was Yoon Jongwoo's mentor and that their bond went beyond mere camaraderie. He was aware that he should keep work separate from personal feelings, but this time it would be a significant challenge.

Director Kwak looked at his secretary, who was still holding Yoon Jongwoo back with all his might. His secretary hesitated but eventually stepped aside and left the room, obeying the director's silent command.

"Sir! You're going to find sunbae, right? Sunbae… he has to be alive. I'm sure he's just a little hurt and unconscious somewhere, or his communicator broke, which is why he can't reach us. He's done it so many times before. He'll come back soon, asking us what happened…"

After a police helicopter accident in Tehran triggered a series of explosions, all signs of life from Kwon Taekjoo had gone silent. It would have been a relief if it were merely a malfunction of the device, but days had passed with no word from him. More than enough time had elapsed for an elite agent like Kwon Taekjoo to return. And if he couldn't, he would have at least reported back to the NIS. The absence of any trace meant that, somehow, he was unable to return on his own.

Director Kwak approached Yoon Jongwoo and patted his shoulder, offering him some comfort.

"We're using every resource we have to find him. And we will find him. So go get some rest. I heard you haven't been home in days."

"Sir, I'll do anything. Just give me the order. If I can hack into the security cameras or satellites in Tehran, I'm sure I'll find Sunbae. Or send me directly to Iran. I'll go look for him myself. Please?" Yoon Jongwoo sobbed, pleading with his hands clasped together. He begged like a child cornered with no way out, even though he knew deep down that the director couldn't permit it.

Iran was burning with rage, hunting for those responsible for the terrorist attack, and the entire world was focused on Tehran. The NIS couldn't afford to make any rash moves to search for an agent who had disappeared amid such a storm.

Moreover, intelligence agents were meant to operate in the shadows. Even if Kwon Taekjoo had died in the line of duty, they wouldn't be able to bring his body back, and depending on the circumstances, they might even have to deny his identity. Agents dedicated their lives to the nation, but they could be abandoned at any moment in the nation's interest. That was the fate of intelligence agents.

"... Sunbae's father and brother died while serving their duty... and now he's the only one left. His mother can't even sleep at night because she worries about him... She asked me to look after him, to check in on him at home, even if she wasn't there. If something happened to him, how could I face her? What could I possibly say?" he cried in deep sobs, dropping to his knees and clutching Director Kwak's leg.

"Sunbae sacrificed too much for all of you! The country can't just turn its back on him like this. We're all still citizens with rights… They can't discard us like spent batteries…"

"We move in the darkness and aspire to the light.

We, the nameless, dedicate our lives in search of freedom and truth.

We pledge limitless loyalty and devotion to the nation and its people."

The ideals of merit and service that had been instilled in every NIS employee now felt bitter to him.

Yoon Jongwoo trudged back to his darkened home. As soon as he was inside, he hugged his bag tightly and crouched down, the sobs he had been holding back pouring out once more. He buried his face in his bag and began to cry quietly.

Thoughts of Kwon Taekjoo had consumed him all day. His mind drifted back to their first meeting. After winning an international hacking marathon organized by a U.S. tech company, Yoon Jongwoo received numerous job offers, including one from the NIS. Ever since he was young, he had dreamed of becoming a white-hat hacker, so it didn't take him long to make a decision.

As soon as he finished his training, he was assigned directly to a real operation. As part of the support team, he was paired one-on-one with field agents, tasked with providing remote assistance. His colleagues were quickly paired up with their partners and soon adapted to their roles, despite their numerous complaints.

But Yoon Jongwoo's partner had been absent for several days. With no other tasks to do, he sat idly for a long time. Then, unexpectedly, he was assigned to support his partner remotely. It was his first real mission, and he was tense with nerves. But his partner spoke to him first over the radio.

["So, you're the new rookie who just arrived?"]

Yoon Jongwoo wasn't even sure if that was an appropriate greeting, given the blunt, casual tone. His first impression of Kwon Taekjoo was far from positive. Every time they started a mission, Kwon Taekjoo ignored all of Yoon Jongwoo's suggestions, only demanding information when he needed it and doing things his own way. With his independent and headstrong nature, he couldn't have been a worse partner. It was as if a dark shadow had suddenly been cast over Yoon Jongwoo's bright and promising future.

Yoon Jongwoo didn't meet Kwon Taekjoo in person until they successfully completed their mission. He was busy drafting a report when someone approached him. The man was so

battered that his face was a mess of cuts and bruises. Kwon Taekjoo examined him silently for a long time before giving his assessment.

“Hmm… I’m not sure you’re much use, but it looks like I can put you to good work.”

“...Excuse me?”

“Want to grab something to eat with me? What do you like?”

Yoon Jongwoo insisted it wasn’t necessary, but Kwon Taekjoo dragged him along anyway, taking him out for barbecue. Sitting across from him was awkward and uncomfortable, and Yoon Jongwoo only hoped he could leave soon. Kwon Taekjoo probably felt the same, but even so, he prepared a lettuce wrap and offered it to him. Yoon Jongwoo hesitated for a moment before accepting, only for Kwon Taekjoo to start lecturing him as if he had been waiting for that exact moment.

“Stop picking at your food and eat. And start working out. Physical fitness is crucial for agents like us.”

Then, Kwon Taekjoo stuffed an enormous bite into his mouth, his cheeks puffed out.

With his strong physical presence, his carefree, almost rude attitude, his adventurous spirit, his impressive skills, and even his strong leadership, Kwon Taekjoo seemed to have it all. It was clear he was someone completely different from Yoon Jongwoo, even from birth. Yoon Jongwoo felt his spirits sink at the thought of being paired with him for a long time. He downed the drink Kwon Taekjoo poured for him in one gulp, convincing himself he would have to submit a resignation letter as soon as possible.

Kwon Taekjoo didn’t take long to get Yoon Jongwoo, already completely drunk, into a taxi and wave him off to go home. Luckily, he didn’t join him, saying he’d stay for a few more drinks. As Yoon Jongwoo gave him a halfhearted bow, Kwon Taekjoo leaned in, studying him closely. Yoon Jongwoo feared he’d get another lecture, but Kwon Taekjoo just ruffled his hair. Even that gesture didn’t sit well with him.

“You did a great job. It must’ve been chaos for your first time, but you worked hard to have my back. Things went perfectly for the first time in a long while, thanks to you. I look forward to working with you more.”

Yoon Jongwoo still had countless complaints about Kwon Taekjoo, but that small gesture, along with his blunt encouragement, softened his feelings. Maybe it was because he sensed no pretense or dishonesty in him.

And so, without realizing it, they had gone through their fair share of ups and downs together. It wasn’t long before Yoon Jongwoo began to gain the sympathy of his colleagues. Although his role was supposed to be remote support, Kwon Taekjoo often dragged him into fieldwork whenever he felt like it. Yoon Jongwoo had barely scraped by a few times. Each time, he’d return swearing he would resign from the NIS.

He should have resigned back then. Maybe then, he wouldn't be suffering the immense sadness he felt now.

Every time they finished a mission, he felt an odd sense of accomplishment. He couldn't talk about what he'd done anywhere, and no one would ever know anything about his work, but he felt proud knowing he had done something important for his country. He even felt a duty to protect the ordinary lives of people who knew nothing else. It made him feel like he was someone significant.

But, would he ever feel that proud again? Could he do things on his own without Kwon Taekjoo by his side? He didn't have the confidence.

Yoon Jongwoo sobbed and curled up. He had cried so much that his head throbbed, and his eyes were too swollen to open fully. His body and soul were utterly exhausted, his eyelids trembled shut. Having spent all his energy, he didn't even have the will to drag himself to his bed.

Just as a wave of drowsiness threatened to pull him under, Yoon Jongwoo's phone rang. He was about to ignore it but then thought it might be Kwon Taekjoo. He rushed to check his phone. It wasn't who he'd hoped, but he quickly got up, too anxious to feel disappointed. His body moved almost instinctively. After clearing his throat a few times, he answered.

"Hello?"

["Hello, Jongwoo. I'm sorry for calling so late. Did I wake you?"]

The voice on the other end was Kwon Taekjoo's mother. Hearing her voice made his eyes well up, his nose stinging.

"No, ma'am. How have you been?"

["Oh, I'm fine. But what's wrong with your voice? Are you feeling unwell?"]

He had tried to sound calm, even forcing a cheerful tone, but she saw right through him. He let out a forced laugh and pushed his voice out.

"Oh, my voice? I just caught a bit of a cold."

["Oh, dear. Have you been to the doctor and taken any medicine? You need to take care of yourself, especially since you're completely alone. There's no one around to look after you."]

"It's fine. I've been taking my medicine and eating regularly. I still have a lot of the side dishes you prepared for me last time."

["You still have some? Jongwoo, you really don't eat much at home, do you?"]

"No, I eat very well, it's just that… you always make more than enough for me."

["I see. Well, just to be sure, smell everything before you eat it. If anything seems off, throw it out immediately. I don't want you to get sick."]

“Yes, I’ll make sure to do that.”

[“Oh dear, here I go rambling again when you must be tired. I just wanted to ask… have you seen Taekjoo recently? I haven’t been able to reach him these past few days. He mentioned he’d be busy for a while.”]

Even before answering the call, Yoon Jongwoo knew she would ask him this; she often called to ask about Kwon Taekjoo. All he had to do was give her another believable excuse, as he always did. But this time, his lips trembled, refusing to form the words.

He pressed them tightly together, holding back the sob that threatened to escape before he began to lie.

“Oh, are you talking about sunbae? Well… I don’t know all the details, but I heard he had to leave on an urgent business trip.”

[“Really? I couldn’t get in touch with the ambassador either.”]

“The ambassador likely took Sunbae with him. Apparently, there are some issues in Russia.”

[“Is it about the terrorist attack? I heard something terrible happened in Iran, or wherever it was.”]

“Ah… yes, so you already know. That’s right, ma’am. But sunbae didn’t go to Iran personally. There was concern that the terrorists might target the Russian president, so all diplomatic representatives were immediately called back to Russia. Until that’s resolved, I believe both sunbae and the ambassador won’t be returning. It’s a sensitive matter, so you may not be able to contact anyone overseas for a while.”

[“I see.”]

Kwon Taekjoo’s mother accepted his explanation easily, but Yoon Jongwoo could still sense the worry in her voice. He immediately tried to offer her a word of reassurance, as he always did.

“As soon as sunbae returns, I’ll let him know…”

But before he could finish the sentence, his voice caught in his throat. He quickly pulled the phone away, struggling to steady his breathing. It took him a moment to regain his composure.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I had a bit of a coughing fit. When sunbae gets back, I’ll let him know you called and have him reach out to you right away. Please don’t worry too much, ma’am.”

[“Would you? I’m always so grateful to you.”]

“Oh, really, there’s no need to thank me. But ma’am, I think I should go now. I have water boiling on the stove.”

[“Oh, alright then. Let’s hang up.”]

“Take care.”

[“Of course. You get some rest too. Goodbye.”]

The call ended quickly, plunging his home back into silence. A faint, bitter laugh escaped his lips.

He lowered his head and stared intently at his phone. He knew it was absurd, but he started to call Kwon Taekjoo. Before it could even ring, the automated voicemail told him the person on the other end was unreachable. His eyes filled with tears instantly.

But the moment didn’t last long. A loud, jarring knock echoed from the front door, making it shake. Yoon Jongwoo was so shocked he couldn’t even wipe the tears streaming down his face.

It was too late for visitors. Could it be a drunk person who’d gotten the wrong door? As he considered the possibilities, the intruder began pounding on the door again, relentless, as if determined to break it down.

“Wh-Who i…”

He was about to ask who it was, steadying his trembling voice, but before he could finish, the door burst open with a deafening crash, the security latch snapping with a sharp, metallic sound.

“Ahhh!”

The door flew open, revealing the intruder behind it. Standing in the doorway was a tall man whose presence radiated a hostile, menacing aura, his cold eyes glinting with a murderous intent.

“Mr. Yev…” Yoon Jongwoo gasped in shock just as Zhenya stormed into the house, immediately grabbing him by the collar. Yoon Jongwoo didn’t even have time to react before he was slammed against the wall. His hands instinctively clung to Zhenya’s arms in desperation.

“Sniff…geny.”

“Where is Taekjoo?” Zhenya asked bluntly. It was clear he already knew that Kwon Taekjoo was missing. Yoon Jongwoo looked back at him cautiously, his eyes brimming with tears.

“Sunbae is…”

Zhenya lost his patience. He slammed Yoon Jongwoo against the wall again. The impact sent a dizzying jolt through Yoon Jongwoo’s head. Before the pain could fade, Zhenya’s fist connected with his face. Yoon Jongwoo swallowed his sobs and forced himself to speak.

“Sunbae… sunbae is…”

But once again, another sob choked him before he could finish. A thick, bulging vein twisted on Zhenya's smooth forehead. His eyes narrowed with such intensity that they seemed almost inhuman. His grip on Yoon Jongwoo's neck tightened, the pressure so intense that the skin wrinkled under Zhenya's hands.

"Ughh… aghk, can't… breathe…"

Yoon Jongwoo writhed in agony, saliva dripping from the corners of his mouth as his eyes rolled back. Zhenya squeezed him to the brink, then abruptly let go. As he crumpled to the floor, Yoon Jongwoo clutched his bruised throat and let out a series of raspy coughs.

"Agh… haa, they can't… agh, find any sign of sunbae alive. He said… he'd see the mission through to the end… so he stayed… he stayed behind alone… and everything around him was reduced to ashes from continuous explosions. Ugh… even the car he was in was completely destroyed. They haven't found anyone resembling him among the injured… and the recovered bodies are so mangled that it's taking a long time to identify them… w-what do we do? Mr. Yevgeny, what's going to happen to sunbae?" Yoon Jongwoo rambled, his voice choked by sobs.

But his words were so jumbled and interrupted by his cries that Zhenya couldn't fully understand what he was saying. He only managed to gather that Kwon Taekjoo had gone on a mission and encountered an unforeseen accident.

Zhenya slowly shook his head, as if refusing to believe it. Then, without a word, he grabbed Yoon Jongwoo by the back of the neck and hauled him to his feet.

"Show me the way before I destroy everything here."

"Ugh… w-where…?"

Before Yoon Jongwoo could even hear an answer, Zhenya shoved him toward the door. The cold barrel of a gun pressed firmly against his head.

"To the NIS."

It was late when Yoon Jongwoo's car crossed through the back gates of the NIS headquarters. An armed agent stepped forward to block their path. The vehicle followed his order and pulled over. The engine stopped, and Yoon Jongwoo got out of the driver's seat, hands raised. Instantly, as if on cue, all weapons were aimed at the passenger side. When Zhenya stepped out, the security agents surrounded him completely. The tension only intensified at their confrontation.

"Let's go, Mr. Yevgeny."

Yoon Jongwoo took the lead, guiding him forward. As they moved, the security agents stepped aside, clearing their path. They had likely been briefed by Director Kwak, and they were also reluctant to act given the seriousness of the situation. As NIS agents, they would be

careful to avoid any action that could lead to a diplomatic conflict, especially in such a delicate time.

The director's secretary waited by the entrance. After a quick bow, he held out his hand to Zhenya, requesting his cooperation.

"Apologies, but we'll need you to cooperate to ensure the safety of both parties."

"…Mr. Yevgeny."

Yoon Jongwoo looked at Zhenya with a nervous expression. Zhenya shoved the gun he had been holding against Yoon Jongwoo's chest and extended his hands forward. The secretary quickly secured his wrists with a pair of handcuffs.

"This way."

The two walked side by side down the dimly lit hallway, heading towards the director's office. The security cameras were completely off—a clear sign that they didn't want high-ranking officials to know of Zhenya's presence. This was a discreet meeting, one that carried considerable risk for Director Kwak. However, if questioned, he could always claim that the visit was part of a quiet investigation into Zhenya's possible connection with Kwon Taekjoo.

After the secretary knocked on the office door, a distant voice granted them entry. The security agents remained outside as Yoon Jongwoo, Zhenya, and the secretary stepped inside. Director Kwak rose from his seat to greet them.

"Ambassador, it's good to see you. You've arrived just in time…we were about to request your presence in light of recent events."

"What happened to Taekjoo?" Zhenya asked, getting straight to the point. Despite the handcuffs on his wrists, the icy, threatening aura around him refused to fade. It felt as though the temperature in the room was slowly dropping.

Director Kwak held his gaze in silence before responding.

"Information about our agents is classified. I'm afraid I can't disclose that."

"I'll ask again. Is Taekjoo alive?"

"I thought I made myself clear when I said I couldn't tell you that."

"If you make me ask one more time, this building won't be standing by the end of the day," Zhenya growled in a low voice.

Director Kwak was well aware that Zhenya wasn't a true diplomat. He already knew of the man's reputation as a notorious FSB agent, as well as the long list of atrocities he had committed and the fact that even the Kremlin feared him. Given that Zhenya had never cared about consequences, one wrong move, and he might indeed blow up the NIS with his so-called "Anastasia."

Despite this, Director Kwak refused to back down. He needed to understand why Zhenya kept meddling in NIS affairs. Quite simply, he couldn't allow him to interfere in their official operations, which needed to remain off-limits.

"Before we proceed, could you clarify what your relationship with our employee is? I believe that should come first."

Zhenya clenched his jaw. Yoon Jongwoo's eyes darted nervously from side to side.

Suddenly, with a swift, powerful movement, Zhenya spread his arms apart, instantly breaking the handcuffs. The director's secretary, caught off guard, lunged to restrain him, but Zhenya knocked him out with a single blow.

The sound of the secretary collapsing to the floor made the security team burst into the room. Yoon Jongwoo hesitantly raised Zhenya's gun, pointing it at the guards, his arms trembling.

"Stay out," Director Kwak ordered the agents. But they didn't move, frozen in place as the situation worsened.

"Let's not make a scene here."

At the director's warning, the agents exchanged uncomfortable looks and reluctantly stepped back, closing the door behind them. Yoon Jongwoo exhaled a sigh of relief, lowering his trembling arms.

But Zhenya showed no intention of backing down. Exuding a merciless aura, he advanced toward the director. Yoon Jongwoo frantically tried to stop him.

"Mr. Yevgeny! No! You can't resort to violence!"

Zhenya was about to brush aside the irritating Yoon Jongwoo when, suddenly, the phone on the director's desk rang. All three froze, their eyes shifting toward the phone. Who could be calling at such a late hour?

Zhenya nodded toward the phone, signaling Director Kwak to answer. This time, the director didn't resist. He picked up immediately.

"Yes, this is Kwak Younghan."

["We're calling from Tehran."]

"Go on."

["We've found a body matching the description of your missing individual. You mentioned it was an Asian man, 1.83 meters tall, 76 kilograms, with blood type RH+B?"]

"... Where was the body found?"

["It was recovered in northern Tehran, near the recent bombings, right where your agent was last reported missing."]

“I understand. If you send us the report, we’ll review it and be in touch.”

After forcing himself to respond, Director Kwak pressed his forehead in despair. Yoon Jongwoo, pale with horror, shook his head slowly.

“What was all that? Tell me now!”

Seeing their grim reactions, Zhenya grabbed Yoon Jongwoo by the collar, shaking him back and forth. Stunned, Yoon Jongwoo broke into tears as he delivered the bleak news.

“They… they said they found a body in Tehran matching sunbae’s description.”

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END OF VOLUME 7

Chapter End Notes

Support the author by purchasing the novel on Ridibooks.

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That's a wrap on Volume 7—woohoo! I can't thank you all enough for the support; your messages honestly make my day. Just three volumes left now!

Quick heads up: the next few volumes are packed with blood, pain, and all the feels, so buckle up for this emotional rollercoaster! Can’t wait to dive into it with you all!

Nameless Star: First There, Last Out

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•PERSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VOLUME 8

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A profound silence filled the private plane bound for Iran. No one dared to move a finger, nor even whisper a single word. Everything was eerily quiet.

Through the dark window, Zhenya's pale reflection stared back at him. His face was like a seductive work of art, as if each of his features had been carefully sculpted, yet it was utterly devoid of expression or warmth. He looked more like a wax figure than a man. Sleep had eluded him, his mind consumed by one single thought.

"They said… they found a body that matches sunbae in Tehran."

Kwon Taekjoo was gone. He no longer existed in this world. Zhenya would never see or touch him again. His mind resisted processing that single thought. He simply could not accept the first real loss he had ever known.

Zhenya's brow suddenly furrowed, and a nauseating sensation washed over him. He had never felt anything so repulsive.

The NIS had made an exception for Yoon Jongwoo, sending him to Tehran to confirm whether the body in question was indeed Kwon Taekjoo. Naturally, everything was off the record. Director Kwak had set a strict limit… Yoon Jongwoo would receive no support or protection beyond permission to identify the body. He had left the country on a personal trip, not as an NIS agent. Without Zhenya's private jet, they wouldn't have even been able to leave for Iran so quickly.

Yoon Jongwoo had barely stepped out of Director Kwak's office before breaking down into bitter sobs once again.

"Uugh… Sunbae… Sunbaaaee… I should have stopped him from leaving. He was going to quit his job anyway once he got back. I should have told him to quit right then and there," he cried, his voice thick with regret.

Zhenya couldn't understand his words, as Yoon Jongwoo was speaking in Korean and his voice was distorted by tears. But he knew that "Sunbae" likely referred to Kwon Taekjoo. Without a word, Zhenya grabbed Yoon Jongwoo by the back of his neck and stared him straight in the eyes. Under his piercing gaze, Yoon Jongwoo swallowed his sobs and struggled to speak.

"Sunbae told me he felt he was being too harsh with his mother because of his own ambitions. He thought that, even if it wasn't an issue now… it would be later on, that his life was a mess as it was, and that he could leave the NIS without regrets… He said he just wanted to live his own life now. This was supposed to be his last mission."

Zhenya couldn't believe it. According to Yoon Jongwoo, Kwon Taekjoo had been planning to leave the NIS once his current mission was over. The only thing they had ever argued and fought over was his job, and Kwon Taekjoo was someone who had always prioritized his sense of duty above his own mother and his lover.

What had suddenly led him to change his mind?

"Is there something you want from me?"

"Apart from wanting you to stay still? Honestly, no."

"What I'm saying is you shouldn't put yourself at risk because of me."

"Put myself at risk? Me?"

The conversation they'd had not long ago suddenly surfaced in his mind. Kwon Taekjoo had always insisted that Zhenya not get involved in his work. Zhenya had never understood why. After all, if he helped Kwon Taekjoo, then Kwon Taekjoo would finish faster, and it would make things easier for him as well. So… why?

"Do you really think I don't know what your relationship with your family is like? Look, I'm not going to tell you how to treat them or pressure you to make peace with them. That's your business, not mine. But I can't keep watching you cause more conflict with them just for my sake."

"Taekjoo, you're misunderstanding something. Even if you weren't in the picture, my relationship with them is beyond repair. They're insignificant people who wouldn't dare interfere with my life."

"Even so, your roots are with them."

Ever since he had returned from Cuba, Kwon Taekjoo seemed distracted and lost in thought. Sometimes, he would just stare at Zhenya, his expression conflicted. Whenever he voiced his concern about pulling Zhenya away from his own family, Zhenya felt surprised and, oddly, a little touched.

Most likely, Kwon Taekjoo had volunteered for the Tehran mission for the same reason… to atone for his mistakes in Vladivostok. Knowing his nature, he would have wanted to make amends and tie up all the loose ends. And once everything was done, he would have come back to Zhenya once again. If Kwon Taekjoo left the NIS, and Zhenya abandoned his national obligations, they wouldn't have to keep being enemies.

Had Kwon Taekjoo really planned to spend the rest of his life with Zhenya, just like that?

"I've made up my mind. When I return, I'll tell you everything, including all the things I haven't been able to say before. So, don't try to follow or get involved. Just wait for me in silence."

Was this decision to leave the NIS and abandon everything he had dedicated his life to? And all because he didn't want to see Zhenya as an enemy?

"As soon as I'm done, I'll come back to you, alright? Zhenya."

He had made him that promise, only to vanish into thin air after tying Zhenya's hands and feet, leaving him unable to follow. Now, he was gone forever, to a place Zhenya could never reach… but no, that couldn't be true. Until he saw the body himself, Zhenya refused to believe it.

He clenched his fists, blood trickling from where his nails dug into his skin. Yet he felt no pain. All his senses had been dulled from the moment he'd learned of Kwon Taekjoo's possible death. Instead, his nerves were so tightly wound that each slight sound or movement in the air made them tense even more.

He reached for a bottle of painkillers, something he'd never thought he'd use, and recklessly poured as many as would fit into his hand. He no longer remembered how many he'd taken. Maybe they weren't working, because his head felt like it was about to explode from the pain, and the crushing pressure in his chest refused to ease. Everything felt strange, unfamiliar, and he didn't know how to face it.

Soon, the private plane began its descent toward Tehran's military airport. As soon as the plane landed, Zhenya grabbed Yoon Jongwoo by his clothing and pulled him mercilessly. Yoon Jongwoo stumbled behind him, unable even to walk on his own.

Despite the heightened security after the terrorist attack, with restrictions on civilian flights and visitor entries, none of this affected Zhenya. He was not only a Russian diplomat but also the brother of Bazim, a key figure in the Russian delegation attending the summit. Thanks to this, Yoon Jongwoo's entry into Iran had been smooth and uneventful.

They climbed into the waiting car and sped toward the morgue located on the city's outskirts, where all unidentified victims of the attack were reportedly being kept.

All Zhenya could think about was seeing Kwon Taekjoo as soon as possible. Impatiently, he pressed the pedal to the floor. From the moment the engine had started, he hadn't rested for a second, tearing down the road at a reckless speed. In the midst of his taut nerves, the faint sound of quiet sobbing from the passenger seat grated on him. Yoon Jongwoo had been crying non-stop since he'd heard the news about Kwon Taekjoo. The way he acted as if the world had already ended, even though nothing had been confirmed, irritated Zhenya beyond measure.

Unable to tolerate it any longer, Zhenya warned him in a low, cold voice, **"You'd better shut up before I throw you out."**

Yoon Jongwoo only clutched his bag tighter, burying his face in it. His muffled whimpers continued as he tried to suppress his sobs. Even that sound annoyed Zhenya, though he held back from saying anything else.

The car soon arrived at the morgue. It was past midnight. Whether it was because of the late hour or Yoon Jongwoo's preconception of morgues, the surroundings felt eerily silent and unsettling.

An attendant was waiting outside and greeted them as soon as they arrived. Since they were there on an "unofficial" visit, their contact had been arranged through an intermediary rather than through an official request by the South Korean government to the Iranian authorities. They therefore had no choice but to be cautious about the possibility of being discovered.

"This way. We've been expecting you. But who is…?"

The morgue attendant cast a puzzled look at Zhenya. They must have been informed by the intermediary that a Korean visitor was coming, so seeing a tall Westerner beside Yoon Jongwoo had caught them off guard. Concerned that the arrangement might fall through, Yoon Jongwoo quickly jumped in with a convincing excuse.

"Oh, he's here on behalf of the deceased's family since none of them could come at the moment. We've already cleared it with our superiors, so there's no need to worry."

"I see. Please, follow me."

The attendant's suspicions quickly faded as he led them inside. They entered the morgue through a side door by the crematorium in the back courtyard, passing through nearly a dozen security checkpoints.

It might have seemed excessive to guard the bodies so strictly, as if they were protecting a treasure. But under the circumstances, it made sense. A catastrophic terrorist attack had taken place, paralyzing the country itself. The fact that "unidentified individuals" had been recovered from the scene implied that these people probably had no reason to be there in the first place. They could very well be suspects linked to the attack. Someone like Kwon Taekjoo, who had hidden his identity to enter the country, would have even more difficulty avoiding suspicion. If they hadn't personally contacted the morgue, they wouldn't have had the chance to identify his body in person.

The morgue had two underground levels and four above-ground floors. Zhenya and Yoon Jongwoo were escorted to the second basement level. Even after descending the stairs, they had to walk quite a distance into the building. Yoon Jongwoo could swear the temperature kept dropping the farther they went, though it might just have been his imagination.

“There are still many incomplete or damaged bodies in this section,” the attendant explained.

The bodies they’d barely managed to recover weren’t even complete? Yoon Jongwoo began to sob again and stumbled over his own feet. Instantly, Zhenya reached out, grabbing him by the back of the neck and lifting him upright. Yoon Jongwoo hung limply from his grip, whimpering miserably. With an irritated glare, Zhenya shoved him forward.

“This way.”

Soon, they were standing in front of the farthest room down the hall. The attendant opened the door and switched on the dusty lights, which flickered weakly. The walls were coated with mold and strange stains, and cobwebs filled every corner. The heavy stench of charred and decaying flesh hung in the air.

“This is the body we need you to confirm.”

The attendant slid one of the compartments out. With a loud metallic noise, a body wrapped in a bag emerged from the drawer, reeking of ashes and rotting flesh. Yoon Jongwoo couldn’t help but cover his mouth and nose, turning his face away. He barely managed to calm his nausea and looked back at the bag with a hesitant gaze. It seemed far too small to hold someone like Kwon Taekjoo.

“Wh-why is it only…?”

“As I mentioned before, this body is severely disfigured. Are you sure you still wish to proceed with the identification?”

The attendant’s tone implied he wouldn’t recommend it. With eyes full of tears, Yoon Jongwoo glanced back at Zhenya. Zhenya hadn’t taken his gaze off the body bag for even a second. Without hesitation, he unzipped it.

Before Yoon Jongwoo could brace himself, the image of a mangled corpse came into view. The intense burning had melted the face beyond recognition, making it impossible to distinguish the eyes, nose, or mouth. Everything below the knees was missing, either burned away or lost. The remaining pieces looked ready to crumble at the slightest touch, as if they were nothing but fragile chunks of charcoal.

“Ugh…!”

Finally, Yoon Jongwoo ended up vomiting on the floor, his face wet with tears. No matter how hard he tried to contain himself, his stomach churned, forcing him to empty its acidic contents.

Zhenya stood motionless, his feet rooted to the ground. Likewise, his gaze never left the body. Each second felt like an eternity.

How long had they been standing there?

Suddenly, Zhenya grabbed the corpse's head. The attendant, who'd been watching from the side, was startled by the movement and rushed forward to stop him.

"What are you doing?! You can't touch the corpse directly!"

Zhenya swatted the approaching attendant away. The man's body collided with the wall, and his head struck hard against the surface, knocking him out instantly.

Without pause, Zhenya leaned closer to the corpse, bringing his nose directly to its head. The stench of burned flesh should have drowned out any trace of body scent, but he kept sniffing, determined.

"Mr. Yevgeny… Ugh… Erghrk…"

Yoon Jongwoo tried to stop him but ended up expelling more yellow-stained vomit. His legs gave out, and he collapsed to the floor, weakly crawling on all fours, retching again. He wanted the nausea to stop, but his body wouldn't obey him. Hot tears streamed uncontrollably down his face.

Zhenya's pale hands quickly became coated in ash, pus, and blood, but he didn't care, methodically working over the corpse, examining each remaining finger and the fragments of its nails.

Was this Kwon Taekjoo? This?

Perhaps because he wished to deny the truth, but no matter how much he examined the body, he couldn't find anything to confirm that this was Kwon Taekjoo, even though he was certain he'd recognize him immediately.

Zhenya's intense gaze remained fixed on the corpse, charred to the point of ashes. Suddenly, he leaned in to inspect the inner thigh of the corpse. Most of the skin had burned away from the intense heat, but the skin on the inner thighs, shielded from the flames, was less damaged. Though a bit wrinkled, it held its shape better than the rest of the body. Zhenya brushed away the soot with his fingers.

But the mark he expected to find there wasn't. The tattoo etched on Kwon Taekjoo's inner thigh was nowhere to be seen.

"...This isn't Taekjoo," he murmured quietly.

Zhenya spoke in Russian, so Yoon Jongwoo didn't understand his words. He merely looked at him with a bewildered expression.

Zhenya repeated, "This isn't Taekjoo," before abruptly leaving the morgue. Yoon Jongwoo, still clueless, stumbled to his feet and rushed to follow him.

“Mr. Yevgeny! Ah, Mr. Yevgeny! Where are you going?!”

Zhenya climbed into his vehicle without a word. Yoon Jongwoo ran after him and barely managed to jump inside before the car took off at full speed. A second later, the car veered off the road. Zhenya’s foot pressed down on the accelerator, his eyes blazing with a fierce, unyielding determination.

"....."

When Kwon Taekjoo came to, he found himself enveloped in a damp, suffocating darkness. Beyond the cold walls, he could hear endless echoes of moans and sobs, occasionally interrupted by sharp, gut-wrenching screams.

The loud, unnerving sounds that pierced his skull faded, only to return again before vanishing once more. His own consciousness flickered like a dying light, turning on and off. He couldn’t regain his bearings.

Kwon Taekjoo squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again. The ground beneath his cheek was damp. He felt like he was choking, so he took a deep breath, inhaling a thick, fetid stench. Perhaps it was metallic, or even traces of blood. Either way, it was a repulsive odor that had long been festering in that place… the stench of death that lingers once all sense of conviction and justice has crumbled.

He shuddered, trying to move his numb body. His wrists and ankles were tightly bound behind his back, keeping him from moving an inch. Still, he twisted his head and shoulders until he managed to prop himself against the wall. For a moment, his head spun. He began to gag as a wave of intense dizziness overtook him.

“Erhk… Ugh… haa…”

His vision shattered into fragments, so he squeezed his eyes shut tightly. Even that small movement sent pain rippling through every muscle in his body.

After waiting for the nausea to subside, he opened his eyes again and looked around to examine his surroundings. Kwon Taekjoo was alone in the dark, desolate cell, which measured no more than 70 square feet. There were no windows, and the only way out to the outside world was a heavily locked steel door. The small grated opening near the top of the door finally gave him a clue about where he was.

A prison.

He couldn’t remember how he’d ended up here. His mind was completely blank. He searched his memory for his last recollection, but it was useless. His empty, hollow mind rejected every attempt to remember. As he strained his mind, a sharp, stabbing pain began to build in his head.

“Agh…”

Kwon Taekjoo clenched his jaw, forcing himself to push through the pain. Every breath he took carried a faint taste of blood. Even the thud of his heartbeat felt painful.

How long had he been in this state?

Suddenly, footsteps echoed beyond the steel door, growing louder. Someone was approaching, their presence growing heavier until a shadow was cast over the grated opening. Kwon Taekjoo instinctively tensed up and stared at the steel door. After a moment, a man who seemed to be a prison guard peered in, his eyes widening in surprise as he let out a sharp "Eh?"

"Sir, this scum is awake!"

Something felt very strange. The language Kwon Taekjoo heard wasn't familiar at all, yet he could understand every word with perfect clarity. Moments later, the guard's superior leaned into view through the grated window. His gaze overflowed with such malice that Kwon Taekjoo could gauge his personality in an instant.

"Open the door."

"Yes, sir."

The door opened immediately, and both guards stepped inside. Their uniforms bore the names "Ahmad" and "Omar." The higher-ranking guard, Ahmad, strode toward Kwon Taekjoo with wide, firm steps and stomped on his shoulder without a moment's hesitation.

"...Agh."

"Name."

Kwon Taekjoo glared at Ahmad, his lips pressed tightly together in defiance. Ahmad's boot pressed harder on his shoulder, as if attempting to crush his spirit. Kwon Taekjoo clenched his jaw.

"Name!"

"I don't know."

At Kwon Taekjoo's refusal to cooperate, Ahmad delivered a sharp kick to his face, sending his barely upright body crashing back to the floor. Ahmad's boot slammed down on his throat, cutting off his air. Kwon Taekjoo coughed harshly as sour saliva pooled under his chin.

"I'll ask you again. Where are you from?"

"I told you, I don't know."

"You little bastard!"

Ahmad unleashed a series of kicks in response to his defiance, the toe of his boot digging viciously into his side. Instinctively, Kwon Taekjoo curled into a defensive fetal position, bracing his abdomen to endure the blows.

For a while, he silently bore the relentless assault until, suddenly, he drove his knee into Ahmad. Caught off guard, Ahmad stumbled backward, helplessly landing on his back, his head slamming against the ground. Clutching his head, he writhed in pain.

"Have you lost your mind?!"

Omar, who had been watching from behind, quickly sprang into action, swinging his baton at Kwon Taekjoo. Kwon Taekjoo twisted his upper body, barely dodging the blow, and threw his full weight onto Omar, who crumpled beneath him. Kwon Taekjoo then drove his shoulder into Omar's throat, cutting off his air instantly.

"Uugh… Reinforcements! I need reinforcements!" Omar yelled, thrashing his limbs.

The sudden commotion caught the attention of other guards, who rushed over. They paused momentarily, stunned by the unexpected scene, before descending on Kwon Taekjoo, brutally striking him with their batons. Kwon Taekjoo gritted his teeth, enduring the pain, until a violent blow to his head left him weak and dazed. Meanwhile, having recovered, Ahmad unleashed his fury with a flurry of kicks directed at Kwon Taekjoo's body.

Kwon Taekjoo's vision blurred erratically as his body shuddered helplessly. His ears rang with the sounds of Ahmad's heavy breathing and curses.

"A bastard like you, from wherever the hell you came from… you dare lay a hand on a prison guard?"

The guards seemed to know nothing of Kwon Taekjoo's name or origin, just as Kwon Taekjoo himself had no recollection of his own name, nationality, or the reasons for his imprisonment. It felt as though his brain was so inflamed it had ceased to function properly.

Who am I?

After that vague, confused thought, Kwon Taekjoo drifted into unconsciousness.

With a powerful bang, the door to Bazim's hospital room shook violently. Interrupted in the middle of his meal, Bazim instinctively drew his gun, aiming it at the entrance. As the doorknob slowly turned, the security guard who had been leaning against the door collapsed inside the room. Stepping over the fallen guard was none other than Zhenya, who seemed completely unfazed by the gun pointed at him. Bazim's eyes widened in disbelief.

"Yevgeny? What brings you here?"

Zhenya had heard that Bazim had barely survived the terrorist attack, and Bazim's appearance confirmed it. His head and waist were wrapped in layers of bandages, his arms and legs were in casts, and bandages and gauze covered much of his face.

But rather than asking about Bazim's health, Zhenya got straight to the point and revealed the reason for his visit.

"I need you to find someone for me."

"...Find someone?" Bazim responded, tilting his head with a puzzled expression. Suddenly, one person came to mind. He muttered, *"Don't tell me... it's that Korean spy?"*

"You know him?" Zhenya replied.

His previously emotionless face transformed instantly into a threatening, murderous glare, as if ready to strangle Bazim to death if he didn't provide a satisfactory answer. Bazim knew Zhenya wouldn't hesitate to kill his own blood.

"How do you know him, Bazim?" Zhenya demanded, taking another step closer.

His dark shadow swallowed Bazim whole, his icy blue eyes sharp as glass. His look was that of a man who'd lost his sanity long ago. Had the taste of blood finally driven him mad?

It was the same cold gaze he had after returning from slaughtering all the developers of "Anastasia" under orders from the Kremlin. Bazim knew this was the calm before the storm. Zhenya was barely containing his temper, and he could explode at any moment without warning. Alarms sounded in Bazim's mind as his instincts warned him not to provoke him.

"Did you run into him?"

Zhenya's question sounded more like an interrogation. His pale hand gripped the barrel of Bazim's gun and forced it forward, twisting Bazim's wrist. Bazim tried to resist, but it was futile. The gun soon pressed under his own chin.

"What did you do with him?"

In a chilling voice, Zhenya tightened his grip on the trigger. The slightest pressure would send a bullet from the gun. Bazim held his breath, facing a life-or-death moment, then slowly raised his casted arm in surrender. He confessed everything Zhenya wanted to know.

"...I didn't even get the chance to do anything to him. There was a terrorist attack while we were being transported from the airport to the presidential residence. Everyone was too busy trying to escape. I didn't see him until later. He only appeared after I split off from the president to head to a safe zone. At first, I thought he was behind the attack, but he wasn't. If he had been, he wouldn't have let me walk away alive. His real goal was probably to get the North Korean biologist."

"And you're telling me you let him go without doing anything?" Zhenya replied, tilting his head.

He practically seemed to be asking why Bazim hadn't drawn his gun the same way he had just now. Bazim let out a long sigh and muttered bitterly, *"I couldn't stop him. He moved like a cheetah."*

Shame and anger twisted Bazim's expression. Indeed, Kwon Taekjoo wasn't someone Bazim could easily subdue. Even if Bazim's men had surrounded him, Kwon Taekjoo had more than enough skill to break through them. His supposed target had been safely transferred on the day of the attack, meaning Kwon Taekjoo had once again completed his mission. By now, he should have returned to Zhenya, wearing his usual awkward smile. So why was there still no word from him?

"Why do you ask? Did he die in the attack?"

Bazim's sudden question struck deep. Zhenya's distant, contemplative gaze darkened instantly, flashing with murderous intent. His jaw clenched as he slowly shook his head.

"As I said, I have to find him."

"Ah... I can't help you. As you can see, I'm badly injured. And we're already overwhelmed trying to locate the missing members of our own party. Iran is in the middle of a manhunt for whoever's behind the terrorist attack, so we can't afford to act recklessly…"

"If you can't, then I'll make it happen."

With a sharp flick of his hand, Zhenya knocked Bazim's hand away, sending the gun flying across the room. He turned on his heel without so much as a glance back, as if there was nothing left to discuss. A vivid image flashed through Bazim's mind: Zhenya visiting Iran's revered leader and threatening him. If he dared such a thing to someone idolized as a divine representative, it would not only shatter any alliance between the two countries but also ignite a war. Bazim clutched his throbbing head.

"Haa... wait."

Zhenya paused mid-stride, sensing a trace of cooperation in Bazim's tone. Bazim hurried to reassure him by offering a potential solution.

"I'll add him to the official list of missing Russian delegates from the attack. If he shows up in a hospital or they find his body, I'll be informed immediately. Since the attack happened just before the summit conference, Iran will want to make amends by prioritizing the search and rescue of our people first, even if all they find are bone fragments."

"....."

"Just pray, Bazim."

"What?"

"Pray that he's alive, wherever he is. Because if he's not, what you fear most will come true."

"Yevgeny!"

Bazim clung desperately to Zhenya, leaning halfway off the bed in his desperation.

“We’re already in a difficult situation. Don’t do anything reckless that would put yourself and our family at risk. We’ll be seen as a permanent stain against our own country.”

Zhenya snorted and turned back with a disturbing expression. He was smiling, but his smile was twisted with fury.

“Our family? Our country? Do you still expect that kind of loyalty from me? How many times have I told you? I couldn’t care less about either. The only thing that matters to me is that what belongs to me returns safe and sound. So, as I said, you’d better pray, Bazim… pray that what is mine hasn’t suffered the slightest harm.”

In the end, even his twisted smile faded, replaced by a look of pure contempt. No one would look at rotten trash the way he was looking at Bazim right then.

“If you want to live, you’d better not be the one who laid a finger on what’s mine.”

Yoon Jongwoo had spent days holed up in a hotel in Tehran. Each time he glimpsed the city out his window, the reality of his location struck him, though it still all felt surreal. The last few days had been so chaotic that his mind was left disoriented.

The moment he arrived in Iran on Zhenya’s private jet, they went straight to the morgue. Zhenya examined the body thoroughly by hand before abruptly declaring it wasn’t Kwon Taekjoo. Jongwoo had no idea why Zhenya seemed so sure.

“Mr. Yevgeny, are you certain that body doesn’t belong to sunbae? Are you absolutely sure?” he pressed, trailing after him. Zhenya didn’t respond. Instead, he drove to a hospital in silence, offering no explanation about whom he was going to see or why.

Upon arrival, Zhenya left Yoon Jongwoo in the car and entered alone. Jongwoo tried to follow but was stopped by guards at the entrance. With no other option, he returned to the car to wait.

While he waited, Jongwoo carefully gathered the tissues Zhenya had used to clean his hands and sealed them in a bag, along with a hair he’d taken from the corpse. He couldn’t rely solely on Zhenya’s instinct to determine if the body wasn’t Kwon Taekjoo’s. He needed verification to be certain. But more than anyone, he hoped Zhenya was right and that Taekjoo’s DNA wouldn’t be found in the samples he’d collected.

After a while, Zhenya returned to the car. His expression was still grim, as if he hadn’t found what he was looking for. He didn’t mention who he’d met or what had happened inside. He simply drove Jongwoo back to the hotel where they now waited.

“Where are we…?”

Zhenya abruptly dropped a laptop in front of him, turned it on, and went to the bathroom without a word. Soon after, the sound of running water echoed softly through the door. Jongwoo slumped into his chair, defeated, and glanced at the laptop screen. It was locked

behind a complex password, with a security system unlike any he'd seen. After a brief pause, he set to work dismantling its multi-layered encryption.

Zhenya returned from the bathroom just as the laptop was nearly ready to boot. Observing the decryption process, he muttered, **"I suppose you're somewhat useful."**

He then casually tossed a tablet to Jongwoo. It contained detailed information on Iran's newly established satellite internet network, existing communication satellites, and a notorious private company known for selling military intelligence to foreign nations.

"This is..."

"Search every place Taekjoo was last seen. Instead of sitting there sulking, do something useful for once and find any trace of him."

Before leaving Korea, the NIS had warned Jongwoo not to engage in reckless behavior. For a spy like him, trying to gather intel in a foreign country without permission was more than risky. If discovered, he'd lose his job—although that would be the least of his worries. Evading punishment would be tough, and a diplomatic conflict could easily arise.

Even so, Jongwoo couldn't let go of the hope that Taekjoo was still alive somewhere. Rather than sit idly awaiting news, he wanted to do anything, no matter how small, to help with the search. After all, his first and only mentor and superior might be out there, desperately waiting for help.

And so, Jongwoo spent entire days in his hotel room, hacking into the satellite networks Zhenya had provided. He reconstructed the exact locations and times where Taekjoo was last seen and gathered all available security footage from then on. Unlike South Korea, Iran lacked widespread security cameras and vehicle dash cams, but he clung to whatever leads he could find.

Meanwhile, Zhenya came and went frequently. Sometimes he returned in the same clothes; other times, he looked disheveled and dirty. On each occasion, he smelled of something distinctly unpleasant that Jongwoo couldn't identify—perhaps the metallic tang of blood or something else in the air outside. Zhenya also handed him USB drives or phones from unknown origins.

Jongwoo backed up all the data from those devices, giving him access to intel from multiple Iranian intelligence agencies. He could retrieve police records and even footage from body cams of officers at the scene.

Without sleep, Jongwoo dedicated himself fully to finding Taekjoo. First, he analyzed dashcam, bodycam, and security footage from the time of the explosions, narrowing down the precise timeframe. Then, he gathered all available images from various angles around the blast sites. Using preset physical traits for Taekjoo, Jongwoo created a 3D model and began searching for figures matching him. After isolating several clips, he examined them meticulously, tracing Taekjoo's steps.

"...Huh?"

After replaying one of the clips over and over, Jongwoo let out a quiet exclamation, unable to hide his amazement. Zhenya's eyes shot open at the sound; he hadn't slept in days and had just begun to doze off.

"What is it?"

"Look here, Mr. Yevgeny."

Quickly, Jongwoo turned the screen toward Zhenya and hit the space bar, playing an edited clip.

When the explosions had gone off, Taekjoo had been thrown toward a side road along with the passenger door, carried by the blast's force. But due to the thick black smoke that spread rapidly, everything that happened afterward was hidden from view.

Jongwoo switched to another security recording, this time from the opposite side of the street, pointing toward the side road. The camera quality was poor, and the area was blanketed in dense smoke that blurred everything.

"Here," Jongwoo said, pointing to a faint silhouette. Only then did Zhenya spot a figure lying on the ground, who stayed there briefly before staggering to his feet. The man slowly made his way toward a nearby building, disappearing from view.

Jongwoo replayed the footage several times and confidently stated, **"He escaped into a building. That's why none of the security cameras or the police managed to spot him."**

"And after that?"

"I found him a few hours later."

Jongwoo quickly opened another video. This one was from the early hours of dawn, even before the sun had risen. Police vehicles and ambulances arrived one by one in front of what seemed to be an apartment complex. Emergency teams rushed inside and soon carried someone out. The footage was taken from a distance, but Zhenya recognized the person being transported instantly. It was Kwon Taekjoo.

Taekjoo lay motionless as they loaded him into the ambulance, his arms limp at his sides. Had he lost consciousness? Zhenya's eyes stayed glued to the ambulance as it sped off, quickly disappearing down the road behind a police vehicle.

"Where is this?"

"I tracked it down; it seems to be a residential building about 3.8 kilometers from the blast site. I think sunbae was wary of being caught by security cameras or random checks, so he avoided the streets, moving from building to building instead. According to a police report from one resident, an unidentified man suddenly appeared in their home. He didn't harm anyone but was unconscious and bleeding heavily from the head. I even traced the ambulance that transported him."

Jongwoo switched to security footage showing a police car and an ambulance. He quickly cycled through other videos, following their route. Finally, the two vehicles arrived at a military hospital. Given the city's state of emergency, it wasn't surprising they'd taken a civilian to a military center for treatment. However, it was suspicious that no one matching Taekjoo's description appeared on the official list of injured, especially since anyone could tell at a glance that he was a foreigner.

"Is he still there?"

"I'm not entirely sure. It seems he wasn't admitted through the usual procedures, and I couldn't find any record of him leaving the hospital. Do you think something might have happened there?" Jongwoo muttered despondently, lowering his eyes. He wanted to dismiss the possibility but couldn't feel too optimistic either.

Enough time had passed for Taekjoo to escape on his own if he'd regained consciousness. The fact that he hadn't meant he was either still unconscious or unable to escape alone. That thought made Zhenya unwilling to wait any longer.

Zhenya abruptly stood up and stormed out of the room. Only one thought filled his mind: he would recover Kwon Taekjoo, even if it meant tearing down the entire hospital to find him.

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Chapter End Notes

Support the author by purchasing the novel on Ridibooks.

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Just to clarify, the only place I post my translations is on AO3 under the username foolish_zainka. If you ever find my work posted somewhere else, I'd really appreciate it if you could let me know. Thanks so much for your support!

Nameless Star: First There, Last Out

Chapter Notes

⚠️ This chapter contains depictions of sexual abuse.

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The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•PERSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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When Kwon Taekjoo opened his eyes again, his body was swinging uncontrollably, jerking from side to side against his will. He kicked his legs, trying to steady himself, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't find solid ground. His toes barely brushed the floor before he lost his balance once again, swinging violently. His whole body twisted, painfully straining his bound arms.

"...Ugh!"

He was hanging by his wrists, cuffed to a metal bar above his head. Every movement of his limbs caused the cuffs to scrape against the bar, making a sharp, grating noise. The air carried a metallic, almost bloody stench. Dark red stains marred the tiled floor below him. In the haze of his blurred consciousness, his instincts screamed that he needed to get out of this place—now.

His head kept drooping, but he forced himself to hold it up, inspecting his surroundings. The darkness overhead loomed like it was about to collapse and swallow him whole. He had no idea how long he had been here, where he was, or how he had ended up in this state.

Kwon Taekjoo lowered his head, squeezing his eyes shut before reopening them. His blurred vision sharpened slightly, and the room around him slowly came into focus.

Unlike the rough, concrete-lined cell he had first woken up in, this room was covered in tiles. There was no window to the outside, and the entrance was a thick iron door with no openings. The smell of sewage permeated the air, confirming he was likely in some kind of underground facility.

Kwon Taekjoo was in a back room that seemed well soundproofed. On the other hand, that meant any noise from within would echo intensely, amplifying the terror for anyone trapped inside.

On one side of the room, there was a bathtub and a sink; on the other, a desk and a steel chair. The desk held various odd tools: pliers, hammers, and hooks. Judging by everything he had observed in the room, Kwon Taekjoo figured he was in a torture chamber disguised as an interrogation room.

“Are you awake?”

After a long silence, Kwon Taekjoo finally looked forward, where Ahmad and Omar sat next to each other, sharing a cigarette. Ahmad gave a sly grin and stood up. His shadow stretched to twice his size, creeping along the wall until it merged with Kwon Taekjoo’s.

Suddenly, he grabbed Kwon Taekjoo by the chin.

“Well? Do you like it? You seemed to want to keep a lot of secrets from us, so I brought you somewhere a bit more... private.”

Ahmad leaned in close, the tip of his cigarette grazing the tiny hairs on Kwon Taekjoo’s cheek. A faint, acrid smell of burnt hair filled the air.

"I'm going to have a great time with you tonight. You see, people end up sharing all their secrets with friends. Who knows? Maybe if we get close enough tonight, you’ll start spilling your little secrets too,” Ahmad taunted, abruptly releasing his chin.

Even that small motion sent Kwon Taekjoo’s immobilized body swinging in the air. His cuffs clanged against the metal bar, and the shrill sound reverberated throughout the interrogation room.

Kwon Taekjoo stifled a groan of pain, glaring fiercely at Ahmad standing before him. It was as if he would tear him apart if only his wrists were freed from the cuffs. Ahmad savored the fiery look in his eyes and began fiddling with the tools on the desk that Kwon Taekjoo had noticed earlier.

"Don’t be so afraid. This will be a lot more fun than you think. Of course, if you're willing to cooperate, things might get a lot more... boring," he threatened in a sinister tone.

Usually, by this point, most prisoners would desperately start begging for forgiveness or, at the very least, trying to prove their innocence. No matter how tough they acted, eventually, everyone crumbled under total isolation.

But Kwon Taekjoo refused to back down. In fact, the more he was cornered, the stronger his defiance and hostility seemed to grow. It was clear he was different from any other prisoner Ahmad had encountered. Either he was used to such suffering from repeated exposure, or he had undergone rigorous training that made him unbreakable, even in the face of extreme fear. Ahmad's bored expression shifted to one of renewed curiosity and the desire to see just how far he could push Kwon Taekjoo.

"You've got some resilience, I'll give you that. I'm going to have to break through that first if we're going to have a productive conversation."

Ahmad picked up a sharp blade, scraping it against a thick piece of leather.

"You don't know your name, your age, not even your nationality? So, what then? Are you saying your entire memory vanished? Funny how people with secrets always seem to conveniently forget things when it's to their advantage," he remarked, turning to face Kwon Taekjoo.

Despite the gleaming edge of the blade, Kwon Taekjoo didn't flinch. He simply kept silent, holding his breath.

"I've searched everywhere, but I can't find any record of your entry into the country. When, where, and how could a rat like you have infiltrated? I've thought it over again and again, and there's only one conclusion I can come to. One that explains why you keep claiming you don't know your name or where you came from."

Ahmad seemed convinced of some definite conclusion. Kwon Taekjoo had a hard time guessing what that might be. He couldn't remember anything—not even his name, his job, or where he lived. Every time he tried to recall something, his mind clouded over, like he was lost in a thick fog.

"You bastard, you were part of the terrorist attack, weren't you?"

"Terrorist attack?"

"Oh, now you're going to pretend you didn't know about that?" Ahmad sneered.

Even though Kwon Taekjoo had no idea who he was, where he came from, or why he was on the run, he knew the city was in a state of emergency from frantic news reports about a terrorist attack. But he had never considered he might be involved in the incident. Was Ahmad implying that he was?

Kwon Taekjoo began searching through his memories. The first thing he recalled was waking up sprawled on the side of a road. For some reason, he was severely injured and could barely move. Driven purely by survival instincts, he had managed to hide in a nearby apartment complex. That was all he remembered before passing out.

The next time he opened his eyes, he was in a hospital. He'd jolted awake in shock, only for the medical staff to rush over and inject him with a sedative. He hadn't lasted long before slipping into a deep sleep. When he woke again, he was here, in what seemed like a facility

for criminals. A place outside the reach of the law or human rights. Based on everything he had learned, it was clear they suspected he was a terrorist.

"You have a mouth, so use it. If you're innocent, why were you lurking around the site of the explosions? Your identity is still unknown. You were armed with a gun and attacked the police!" Ahmad suddenly shouted at him. His deafening voice echoed through the entire detention center. To anyone far off, it must have sounded like the roar of a savage beast.

"Answer me. Who sent you here?"

Ahmad pressed the sharp blade under Kwon Taekjoo's chin. One wrong move, and it would slice his skin.

Yet the more Ahmad threatened him, the more calmly Kwon Taekjoo pieced the situation together. From Ahmad's aggressively pointed questions, it seemed he had no idea who Kwon Taekjoo really was. The fact that they couldn't verify his identity through fingerprints or records of his entry into the country suggested that Kwon Taekjoo had somehow infiltrated unnoticed. It made sense that they would accuse him of being a terrorist since he had been found severely injured near the attack site and had been pursued by the police soon after.

The only problem was that he couldn't remember anything related to the incident. It was as if someone had detonated a bomb inside his mind, blowing everything to pieces. For now, all he could discern about himself was that his senses were razor-sharp, his body responded with speed and agility when under attack, he had a high tolerance for pain, and he spoke several languages fluently.

But what kind of person was he? And what had brought him to this country?

"Ah, you're a stubborn little bastard. Looks like words aren't enough to get through to you, huh?"

As Ahmad's twisted, mocking voice reached his ears, something slid across his neck. The blade pressed against his throat had finally cut his skin. Blood trickled down Kwon Taekjoo's collarbone, soaking his prison uniform. A satisfied grin spread across Ahmad's face as he held the blade threateningly to Kwon Taekjoo's skin, slowly trailing it down toward his chest.

Ahmad locked eyes with Kwon Taekjoo, provoking a tense standoff before suddenly slashing downward. With a few swift movements, Kwon Taekjoo's shirt was torn in two, and his pants and underwear shredded. The ripped fabric fell to the ground, leaving him instantly stripped of every thread. He was practically abandoned in this barbaric place, completely naked and deprived of his freedom—a situation that would break anyone's spirit.

In that regard, Ahmad was well-practiced in the art of torture. He knew exactly how to push his victims to the point of submission.

Ahmad slowly let his gaze roam over Kwon Taekjoo's exposed body, on display like meat at a butcher's shop. Suddenly, he flashed a smile and shot him a leering look, unrestrained.

“What do we have here? One look at your tits and anyone would think you were a girl. If I squeeze them, will milk come out?”

Suddenly, he grabbed Kwon Taekjoo’s chest, squeezing it hard before releasing. He even gave it a loud slap, making the flesh bounce with a certain pliability. A red handprint appeared on Kwon Taekjoo's smooth skin. Behind them, Omar laughed indecently. It was clear they used this kind of degradation on other prisoners too, breaking them down with shame and humiliation until they got the answers they wanted.

Ahmad stared directly at Kwon Taekjoo with a satisfied smile, unwavering even in the face of the blatant abuse he inflicted. He gave a slow nod, as if daring him to maintain his defiant stance. Then, grabbing Kwon Taekjoo’s face with both hands, he forced his mouth open and inspected it thoroughly—from the roof of his mouth to the sides of his cheeks, and even the back of his throat. He lifted Kwon Taekjoo’s tongue with his thumb, feeling beneath it in case he had hidden anything there.

But there was nothing unusual for Ahmad to find, not even a suicide pill that spies or terrorists might sometimes carry.

After carefully checking both ears as well, Ahmad shot a sharp look at Omar, who quickly stepped forward, fastening a leather strap around Kwon Taekjoo’s waist and securing it to the metal bar overhead. Kwon Taekjoo's lower body swung upward, his ass pointing high. Omar slowly circled him from behind, grabbing his buttocks and pulling them apart. Kwon Taekjoo clenched his jaw, as if he were nearing the limit of his tolerance.

“Do you know how dangerous a reckless person can be? They use every hole in their body as storage, not realizing the damage it’ll do to them later. At least the idiots who shove drugs up their ass and die during transport leave intact bodies. But those who try to smuggle bombs or gold ingots the wrong way end up with their guts torn apart, looking absolutely horrendous. I have no reason to be gentle when I pull that crap out of those thieves.”

After his long rant, Ahmad suddenly spat into Kwon Taekjoo's asshole with a loud, wet sound, then thrust his thumb inward, probing his inner walls. Kwon Taekjoo’s jaw clenched tightly, a rough grinding sound escaping through his firmly pressed lips.

“Shit... ”

“Hm? Now you feel like talking?”

Hearing his curse from under his breath, Ahmad cracked a smirk, beginning to thrust his finger in and out insistently. Kwon Taekjoo's abdomen contracted at the strange intrusion and his hole tightened around Ahmad's finger. Ahmad let out a loud laugh at the sight of her reaction.

“Look at it. Just a few thrusts and you're already taking it like a slut. How many people have you been fucking?”

Ahmad was about to push his finger even deeper into Kwon Taekjoo when Omar suddenly noticed something. ***"Sir, what's this?"*** he asked, pointing to the inside of Kwon Taekjoo's thigh, where something was etched into his skin.

"What does it say?"

"I couldn't tell you. Looks like Cyrillic script."

"Cyrillic script? You mean the kind they use in Russia?"

"Yes."

"What the hell? Does that mean this bastard is from Russia?"

"I don't know, sir, but it wouldn't hurt to be cautious."

The two whispered to each other, exchanging uneasy glances toward Kwon Taekjoo. If he was indeed part of the Russian delegation attending the summit, then everything—his presence near the terror attack site, his capture while severely injured, and the weapon found in his possession—would no longer seem suspicious. The only issue was that, as someone officially invited to the country, there should have been records of his identity and entry. But that, too, could be explained if the Russians were deliberately keeping him off the radar for some reason.

If that was the case, they couldn't afford to handle him carelessly. Even under the guise of standard interrogation procedures, mistreating him could become a serious breach of diplomatic protocol.

"For now, check if Russia is looking for an Asian man fitting his description."

"Yes, sir."

Following orders, Omar quickly left the interrogation room, leaving Ahmad alone with Kwon Taekjoo in the oppressive, dim space. Ahmad examined Kwon Taekjoo's face with a perplexed expression.

"So, you're from Russia?"

He tilted his head as if struggling to believe it, even though he'd just suggested it himself. He even clicked his tongue, clearly disappointed by this sudden turn of events.

"Well, damn it. I guess we'll have to treat you like a prince until we're sure. But don't worry—there are still plenty of ways I can play with you without leaving a mark," Ahmad taunted darkly, moving back toward the tools laid out on the table.

Setting the sharp knife aside, he began searching for a substitute while continuing his monologue.

"We can't blindly trust the Russians either. Who's to say they didn't have something to do with the attack? You know how it goes—your enemies are often the ones closest to you,

and it's always the people you once trusted who end up stabbing you in the back."

After finishing his words, Ahmad picked up an extendable baton and began coating it thoroughly with petroleum jelly. Kwon Taekjoo's eyes narrowed warily as Ahmad approached.

"What the hell are you trying to do, you filthy bastard?!"

"As I said, I'll play with you in ways that won't leave a mark," Ahmad whispered from behind, dragging his tongue along the side of Kwon Taekjoo's neck and across the top of his ear. Kwon Taekjoo's skin prickled with revulsion at the loathsome touch.

"Getting the truth out of someone is easier than you think. You just have to break them down again and again until they finally shatter."

Ahmad roughly pushed one of Kwon Taekjoo's buttocks aside and pressed something hard against his hole. Kwon Taekjoo immediately recognized the texture...it was his baton.

"Breaking you is going to be an easy task for me. Everyone falls apart once their pride is shattered. Tell me, when was the last time you cried?"

"...What?"

"I'll make it today."

Then Ahmad forced the baton inside him. The tip rubbed against his entrance for a few seconds, stopped by the tight resistance, before it finally broke through and penetrated inside him.

"Aaah...!"

"When bastards like you end up here, one of two things always happens... either you die with your little secret rotting inside you, or you spill the whole truth before that. Which one will it be for you?"

"Aagh, ugh!"

The corners of Ahmad's lips curled upward as he continued to thrust the baton in and out of Kwon Taekjoo, whose knees buckled under the relentless violence that pierced and stretched his hole. Kwon Taekjoo's fists clenched until they turned white. Ahmad roughly slapped his tight, defiant ass, the blow causing him to momentarily relax the tension. Seizing the opportunity, Ahmad began to ram the baton deeper into him, as if he had been waiting for this moment.

"Ugh, aagh...! Shit, ughh!"

Despite Kwon Taekjoo's efforts to stifle them, groans of pain tore out of his throat. His body writhed, shaken by spasms, as he struggled to endure the merciless agony tormenting him. The intense heat burned him from the inside. And yet, in the midst of the pain, there was an

eerie sense of familiarity in his body's every reaction and change, making him feel bewildered.

Had he been subjected to such torture multiple times before?

Finally, Ahmad yanked the baton away, which had been threatening to pierce a hole in his gut. Kwon Taekjoo's body, writhing in pain, shuddered violently from the sensation.

"Aaah, haa... damn... it..."

"Well? Feel like talking now?"

"Damn it, I told you I don't know! How many damn times do I have to say it?!"

Ahmad grinned with satisfaction at his outburst of frustration. He patted Kwon Taekjoo's cheek with the baton, now gleaming with melted petroleum jelly.

"If you don't know, I'll make sure you find out soon enough. Looks like it's going to be a very long night, don't you think?"

His words couldn't have sounded more hopeless to hear.

"Excuse me! Who are you? Why are you doing this?"

As Zhenya stormed into the hospital, the director's secretary blocked his way, trying to stop him. Ignoring him, Zhenya brushed past and headed for the office. When the secretary grabbed his arm, shouting, "Sir! Excuse me!" Zhenya twisted his wrist and slammed his palm against his nose. Before the man could even recover, Zhenya threw him into the hallway.

Without a sound, Zhenya closed the door behind him, turning just as another employee, watching from a distance, frantically called security. But no matter how many times he hit the button, there was no response… Zhenya had already taken care of each and every one of them before entering the hospital.

Seeing Zhenya approach, the employee picked up the phone to call the police, but a dark shadow quickly fell across his face. Before the call could connect, Zhenya's hand was around his throat. He struggled to break free, but Zhenya's grip was unbreakable. Zhenya lifted him into the air until his feet dangled above the ground.

"Aagh... Pl-Please, don't..."

Zhenya's eyes were cold and indifferent. It looked like he could snap the man's neck at any moment. Faced with a life-threatening situation, the employee raised a hand, pointing toward the director's office. Zhenya immediately let go and headed for the closed door.

He pressed down on the handle, but it didn't budge, clearly locked. A muffled voice could be heard inside. The director was clearly aware of the commotion outside and seemed to be desperately calling the police. Zhenya released the handle, then kicked the door down in one swift motion. Part of the lock broke along with the door, which swung open like a flimsy

piece of paper. Inside, the director, still clutching the phone, swallowed hard with a sharp gasp and reached for his gun. His hands shook with terror as he held it.

“Wh-Who are you? Why are you doing this to us?”

“I’m looking for someone.”

Zhenya moved quickly toward the director, whose anxiety mounted as he pulled the trigger in panic. A bullet whizzed past Zhenya in a split second, striking the handcrafted ornament behind him. Completely unfazed, Zhenya continued advancing, and the director, frozen with fear, fired continuously at him.

But no matter how precisely he aimed, every shot missed its mark. Zhenya dodged each one with movements so swift they seemed almost inhuman. In a flash, Zhenya reached the director, twisting his wrist painfully. At the same time, a bullet fired off toward the ceiling, shattering the lights.

“Aah, I already called the police!”

“Then you’ll have to stay alive until they get here,” Zhenya replied, throwing back the director’s desperate threat as he tightened his grip on the man’s wrist.

“Aah! Please, let go of my hand...!”

“One week ago, at night, an Asian patient should have been brought here by ambulance.”

“One week ago? H-How would I know... Aah! Wait, wait!! It’s just that… we had a large number of patients last week because of the terrorist attack!”

“So, you don’t know?”

“No, no! Ahh! I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you! Ugh, you mean that Asian man who was handed over to the police, right? He was the only Asian patient brought to our hospital.”

The skin under Zhenya’s eyes twitched as he listened to this, his deep blue pupils narrowing until they turned nearly black. A menacing, murderous aura radiated from him. Though the director’s wrist was twisted well beyond a normal range of motion, that was the least of his worries right now. It wouldn’t have surprised him if Zhenya snapped his neck right there and then.

“I... aahh, I don’t know everything either. The police ordered us not to keep any records on him, they only asked for emergency treatment… and took him away as soon as we finished.”

“How and where was that patient injured?”

“He had various burns and lacerations, and… Aah! We suspected a partial fracture and a concussion.”

“Where might the police have taken him?”

“I... don’t really know much about that either, ahh! We only treated him as instructed, sir.”

Zhenya twisted the man’s arm even further, and a horrifying crack echoed from the director’s right arm. The director kicked his feet against the floor, desperately pleading with Zhenya.

“Aaagh! I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you everything! I’m not entirely sure, but it’s likely they took him to Evin Prison. I overheard that they hadn’t confirmed his identity yet. Most unidentified prisoners end up there for interrog—... Aaahhh…!”

Zhenya gave one last twist before letting go of the man’s arm. The director clutched his injured arm, begging for mercy.

Evin Prison was a notorious facility known for holding government opposition protesters in Iran. There, human rights were disregarded, and countless acts of violence and torture were carried out openly under the guise of interrogations. If Kwon Taekjoo was being held there, as the director said, it was painfully clear what kind of treatment he was receiving.

“Of course they would…”

Zhenya quickly left the director’s office. He couldn’t afford to waste any more time. He had to get Kwon Taekjoo out before he suffered further harm.

Elsewhere, staff members were cleaning up the devastated consultation and treatment rooms, but they started to back away as Zhenya suddenly reappeared. The way he walked, eyes fixed ahead, was like a fighter jet locked on its target, ready to open fire. Even the briefest eye contact with him felt like a death sentence.

As Zhenya reached the outside, the distant wail of police sirens hit his ears. They were clearly responding to the frantic distress calls from the director and staff. Zhenya paid them no mind as he slipped into the back seat of his car. Yoon Jongwoo, who’d been waiting in the driver’s seat, glanced anxiously in the rearview mirror, his face pale with fear.

“Mr. Yevgeny, what do we do? The police are here.”

“Drive.”

“Pardon? W-Where to?”

“Anywhere,” Zhenya replied indifferently, as he picked up something from the floor. It was a bazooka.

Meanwhile, several police vehicles had arrived in front of the hospital, lining up in formation to block their exit. They quickly issued a warning to surrender.

“Raise your hands and step out of the vehicle!”

“Any sudden movement, and we’ll open fire!”

They fired a few warning shots, just to make it clear they weren't playing around. Yoon Jongwoo shrieked and ducked his head, glancing nervously at Zhenya, silently asking if he was really supposed to drive off.

"What? Do you want to step out, then?"

"No! I'll go!"

There was no telling what kind of suffering awaited Yoon Jongwoo alone at the hands of the Iranian authorities. He squeezed his eyes shut and floored the gas pedal. The vehicle jerked forward as the police launched a wild assault.

"Aahhh!"

With his head ducked below the steering wheel, Yoon Jongwoo recklessly drove forward. His vision was limited, and a few times he even crossed the center line before swerving back. A bullet punched through the rear window, grazing his earlobe and slamming into the dashboard. He was so deeply terrified that the scream stuck in his throat.

As the vehicle rocked violently, Zhenya fired the bazooka with remarkable precision. He seemed entirely unconcerned about the consequences. Each missile hit its mark, causing police cars to veer wildly and crash into each other. Some even tipped over and rolled after losing control.

Zhenya ruthlessly cleared every obstacle in his path, leaving a trail of devastation in his wake. As they disappeared into the darkness, Yoon Jongwoo began to understand why someone like Kwon Taekjoo had grown so close to Zhenya.

With the relentless flicker of the ceiling lights, the shadow of a bound and suspended figure swung back and forth between the mold-eaten walls. The grating clash of metal against metal echoed through the damp room.

"Ugh... ahh... argh..."

Ahmad was thrusting his baton in and out of Kwon Taekjoo's ass forcefully as he hung on the metal bar. He had fucked him so much that the handle of the baton was now glistening with bodily fluids and lubricant. His abrupt movements caused the baton to slip from his hands, clattering across the floor with a rattling noise.

"Haa, haa..."

Kwon Taekjoo hung there, limp and exhausted, his breaths coming in quick, labored gasps. It felt as if there wasn't enough oxygen in the room. His hole, which had been brutally violated, was so inflamed that it stung and burned every time it tightened. A sadistic ardor coursed through his entire body, reddening his ears, cheeks, shoulders, chest, cock, balls, and even his knees. His skin glistened with a sheen of sweat, and his bulging muscles twitched and writhed, exhausted from straining so hard to endure the pain. Yet, in the heart of near-death, the pulse of life seemed to beat even faster.

Ahmad shook out his stiff wrist and stepped in front of Kwon Taekjoo, tilting his chin up. Kwon Taekjoo's eyes still blazed with a fiery defiance. A vein pulsed on his forehead, and the muscles of his jaw clenched tightly. Despite everything he had suffered, his rebellious spirit remained unbroken.

"Anastasia? What's that? Is that your girlfriend's name?" Ahmad asked mockingly.

Had Ahmad suddenly decided to change his approach? Since he'd noticed Kwon Taekjoo's tattoo that read *"My Anastasia,"* his attitude had shifted.

"If so, maybe I can arrange a little reunion for you two here," Ahmad whispered maliciously.

Kwon Taekjoo didn't respond. He simply shook his head to free himself from Ahmad's grip. Unfazed, Ahmad grabbed his ear and twisted it viciously, forcing him to meet his gaze. His eyes narrowed with a disturbing intensity.

"Or is that your own little nickname?"

"....."

"The way you hold firm, no matter how much I try to break you, is enough to stir anyone's lust. I fucked your hole to see how long you could hold out before you died, only to have you suck it so eagerly. Your reaction is quite impressive. Looks like someone's been paying a hell lot of attention to that ass of yours, Mm? If you were a whore, it would make sense why we can't identify you," Ahmad teased, his fingers subtly stroking Kwon Taekjoo's ear.

Kwon Taekjoo was looking at him with murderous intent when he suddenly smirked in satisfaction.

"Is something funny to you?"

"You seem very curious for all this chatter. And you've also been eyeing me for quite a while." Kwon Taekjoo replied mockingly, hitting him where it hurt the most. His gaze disdainfully flicked to Ahmad's crotch, where his cock was visibly straining as if about to burst, and then back to his face.

"Your cock looks like it's about to explode."

"You fucking cunt...!"

With a hard blow, Kwon Taekjoo's head jerked to the side. His nose shattered, blood soaking his lips. Kwon Taekjoo lowered his head, holding his breath in silence, sticking out his tongue to catch the blood. Ahmad's brows furrowed at the sight, his lips trembling slightly as part of his unsteady breath escaped. His cock twitched, reacting visibly.

"Why don't you punish me with your cock instead of sticking your miserable baton in me."

"... What?"

“You look like you need it badly. Besides, no one's looking.”

“Stop playing with me.”

“Once this is all over, I won't remember anything anyway, just like I can't remember anything right now. The Russians must have brought me here undercover because they have something to hide. Who's going to care if they get their hands on someone like me? If anyone asks, you were just doing your job. Right?”

“You shameless little bastard...you're so desperate to get fucked, huh?”

“You're just realizing that now?”

The corners of Kwon Taekjoo’s lips curled upward as a shallow laugh escaped his mouth. His sweat-drenched skin, labored breaths, the intense smell of the room, and the thick, hot air—everything was more than enough to stir a deep sexual tension between them.

Ahmad stared at him, stunned, before moving closer with a mocking smile.

"I’ve always liked stubborn bastards like you. The harder you are, the more satisfying it is to break you."

He grabbed Kwon Taekjoo’s neck and dragged his tongue up his jaw to lick the blood, his hot breath brushing against Kwon Taekjoo’s lips. Kwon Taekjoo turned his head, subtly avoiding the contact, but Ahmad responded by pressing a taser against Kwon Taekjoo’s balls, giving him a warning.

“I dare you to make any reckless move.”

Then, Ahmad fully licked Kwon Taekjoo’s lips and forcefully pushed his tongue inside. When Kwon Taekjoo tried to pull away, Ahmad yanked his head back roughly, rubbing his lips against his, jamming the taser deeper into his crotch as a clear warning not to resist.

Pressing his swollen erection against Kwon Taekjoo's thigh, Ahmad groped his chest hard enough to leave marks. The front of his pants moistened quickly, making Kwon Taekjoo's thighs slick. Not even a dog in heat would pounce on him with such desperation.

As Ahmad licked his lips greedily, Kwon Taekjoo suddenly thrust his tongue inside his mouth and sucked hard. Ahmad flinched in surprise at the unexpected stimulation, but Kwon Taekjoo didn't stop. He continued to slide his tongue teasingly against Ahmad's own and sucked gently. Ahmad's stiff, aggressive tongue gradually relaxed, submitting to Kwon Taekjoo's caresses. His ragged breathing betrayed the calm he was trying to keep.

Gasping for air, Ahmad finally broke away from Kwon Taekjoo, who was breathing agitatedly and lowered his gaze to meet Ahmad's.

“How long have you been fucking around to learn how to use your tongue like that? Are you really a whore?”

"Come and find out for yourself. If I really was a whore, I'd be just as good at sucking you off down there too."

Ahmad hesitated, a bit tempted by the sudden invitation. But it didn't take him long to realize Kwon Taekjoo's true intentions and smirked.

"...I'm not an idiot. I wouldn't risk doing something so dangerous."

Kwon Taekjoo showed no sign of disappointment. He simply swallowed the excess saliva in his mouth and sucked on the finger that Ahmad had been stroking over his sensitive lips and tongue. As the finger made its way deeper into his mouth, rubbing and exploring its inner walls, Kwon Taekjoo suddenly bit down on it. Ahmad recoiled in shock.

"I told you not to be reckless!".

"...You're being quite the coward. Stop beating around the bush and get over with it. What if your minion comes back?"

Ahmad's patience ran out at his provocation. He dropped his pants and eagerly pulled out his cock, which was, as Kwon Taekjoo expected, not at all impressive. It was always men like him who fell prey to sexual depravity.

"Hurry up."

"Ha, you filthy whore. You're really begging for it, aren't you?"

He spread Kwon Taekjoo's legs apart, placing himself between them as his cock pushed against Kwon Taekjoo's entrance. Kwon Taekjoo clenched his buttocks at the same time, hiding his hole from view. Ahmad was thrusting against him when, frustrated by the arousing sensations, he threw the taser aside and grabbed Kwon Taekjoo's ass with both hands, spreading it wide open. He pressed the tip of his cock against Kwon Taekjoo's asshole, which was slowly opening, while his breath hitched in anticipation. His eyes foggy with lust for some time now.

Pushed to the limit, Ahmad was about to fuck him when Kwon Taekjoo drew his knees together and trapped Ahmad's waist between them. It almost looked like he was begging him for more. Ahmad smiled in satisfaction at his reaction and murmured, ***"Calm down."***

But panic broke out when Kwon Taekjoo's legs tightened even further, compressing Ahmad's lungs. Ahmad struggled to free himself, twisting in Kwon Taekjoo's grip, but it was already too late. Kwon Taekjoo's thighs trapped him in place, and he couldn't move an inch.

"Bastard, let me go. I said let me go."

Realizing the danger, Ahmad struck Kwon Taekjoo's thighs and backside. But it was in vain. The more he struggled, the tighter Kwon Taekjoo's legs constricted around him.

"You fucking bastard, let me go, let me go...! Aahh!"

Kwon Taekjoo, taking advantage of his agile flexibility, bent forward and drove his head into Ahmad's. The sudden impact caused Ahmad to stagger, clutching his forehead in shock. Seizing the opportunity, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed the metal bar above him and lifted himself, locking his legs around Ahmad's neck. He immediately tightened mercilessly, cutting off Ahmad's air supply.

"Ugh, Aaaghk... Ughh!"

Without even the chance to scream, Ahmad writhed violently in agony. A choking gurgle emerged from his open mouth. His nails weakly dug into Kwon Taekjoo's skin, but even that small resistance didn't last long. Kwon Taekjoo brutally twisted his legs, snapping Ahmad's neck with a swift motion. Ahmad's eyes rolled back, and his body went limp between Kwon Taekjoo's legs.

Finally, Kwon Taekjoo released his legs from Ahmad, who fell to his knees on the ground. Stretching his toes, Kwon Taekjoo hooked the keys from Ahmad's waist, tossing them into the air before catching them with his hands.

Twisting his wrists backward, he unlocked the cuffs. His arms were raw, torn open with scratches and cuts from days of restraint.

"Aaah…"

Rubbing his sore wrists, Kwon Taekjoo took a moment to catch his breath and then spat on the floor. However, it didn't relieve the feeling of filth in his mouth. Not even drinking water from a sewer would disgust him as much as this. Nausea overtook him until he gagged, his insides churning as if he were about to vomit his organs. The acid and bile crept into his mouth, mixing with the saliva dripping from his chin.

He stood there for a while, calming his agitated stomach and barely managing to compose himself. He was utterly baffled... Who was he? Why had he had to endure such treatment? But there was no time for reflection. He needed to escape this hellhole as soon as possible.

First, he stripped Ahmad of his uniform and put it on. The clothes were too loose and too short, but it was still better than exposing his obvious skin color and appearance. If he ran into any other guards on his way out, they'd know immediately that he had escaped from his cell. Would he manage to get out without encountering anyone?

To escape, he needed a map of the prison. If he could make it to the security administration building, he might be able to find an exit. Kwon Taekjoo put on the guard's cap, planning his next moves, when a voice suddenly echoed from outside the room.

"Sir, the warden is calling us. I'm coming in."

It was Omar. Before Kwon Taekjoo could even react, the door swung open. Omar froze at the unexpected scene and then shouted, ***"Hey you!"*** Kwon Taekjoo immediately grabbed the baton that had been lying on the floor and hurled it at Omar. The baton spun through the air, hitting Omar square in the head. Omar collapsed to the ground, unable to scream.

Kwon Taekjoo dragged Omar's lifeless body into the interrogation room. After taking his radio, gun, keys, and handcuffs, he stuffed them into his pockets before locking the door from the outside. As soon as he stepped into the hallway, a security camera high above caught his attention. He lowered his head and hurried past it. He had to keep moving at all times; he didn't know when he would be discovered.

Kwon Taekjoo's shadow slid silently along the grimy, dark walls.

The warden of Evin Prison glanced over the official documents that Zhenya had placed in front of him, narrowing his eyes. There were two in total: one was a search-and-rescue list for Russian officials, and the other was an official order from the Russian government to immediately hand over any Asian prisoner under their custody. The warden had already confirmed that Zhenya was a Russian diplomat and that the Asian prisoner currently held in the detention center matched the description of the man on the list. The problem was, he wasn't entirely sure of the condition the prisoner was in. Given the urgency of the Russian government, this man must be very important. What if they had accidentally harmed him? For now, he decided to stall, if only to calm his anxiety.

"We confirm we have an Asian prisoner in custody, yes, but we'll need to conduct a more thorough check to verify if he's the one you're looking for, sir. Also, our interrogation is not yet finished. The lights have already been turned off, and all the inmates should be sleeping, so it would be best if you came back tomorrow. We'll have him ready for you then—"

"Did you torture him?" Zhenya interrupted brusquely.

"What? No, torture? In this day and age? We wouldn't—"

"If you didn't, you'd better bring him to me right now, while I'm still asking. I won't keep talking after this."

"Sir, we have our own procedures for prisoner transfers. You can't just barge in here and demand—"

Before the warden could finish his sentence, a pale hand lunged toward him, heading directly for his eyes. The warden didn't even have time to blink and stood frozen, unable to make a single sound. Zhenya's index and middle fingers made contact with the surface of his eyeballs.

"You're being terribly talkative. I told you this would be the last time I ask you."

The smallest movement would impale Zhenya's fingers into the warden's eyes. The tiny hairs on the warden's skin stood on end from the strange sensation of Zhenya's fingertips against his eyes. They were so close that he could even make out Zhenya's fingerprints. He swallowed nervously, barely managing to open his mouth.

"Wait, just a little more time…!"

Despite the warden's pleading, Zhenya didn't move his hand. He simply stated, **"Bring him now."**

Forgetting even to breathe, the warden extended a hand to fumble around the table, seemingly looking for his phone.

Zhenya calmly handed him his phone, his fingers still lightly grazing the warden's eyes. Tears streamed down the warden's face.

The warden barely managed to dial the night guard's room. The phone rang for a few moments before being interrupted, replaced by the voice of the guard on duty.

"It's me, the warden. Do you know that Asian prisoner we captured a few days ago? Bring him to me right now. Listen to me! Do what I say! What are all these excuses? Hurry up!"

As soon as the call ended, Zhenya finally withdrew his hand. Although his fingers had only brushed lightly against the warden's eyes, he felt as though a disturbing pressure had been pressing on his eyeballs.

"Just give us a moment, please. The prison is not far from here, so he'll be here in ten minutes."

The warden addressed Zhenya, wiping his tears away. Zhenya remained silent, frowning as he looked toward the entrance. Any moment now, Kwon Taekjoo would cross those doors. He had arrogantly insisted on handling everything on his own, only to end up locked in this hellhole. Zhenya wondered what expression Kwon Taekjoo would have when he saw him again. Every minute, every second, dragged on like an eternity.

Meanwhile, the warden was as tense as Zhenya. His eyes anxiously flicked toward the clock. If the night guard didn't arrive with the prisoner in ten minutes, as promised to Zhenya, he knew his life would be over. He needed to buy some more time.

"Oh, yes! Sometimes we store the personal belongings of our inmates here. Would you like to see them?"

"…Personal belongings?"

Zhenya's eyes, which had been fixed on the door, turned toward the warden. Having bought himself a little more time, the warden told Zhenya to wait a moment and quickly stood up. Only after distancing himself from Zhenya did he finally allow himself to breathe.

He opened a cabinet in the corner of the room and pulled out a plastic bag. The prisoners' belongings were stored there before being processed. Sometimes valuable items were found, and at other times, evidence was discreetly disposed of when a prisoner was meant to "disappear" forever.

"This is it."

The warden placed the bag in front of Zhenya before stepping back and sitting as far away from him as possible.

Zhenya immediately ripped open the bag. Inside, there were pieces of clothing piled carelessly. Some were torn and burned, but they were more or less the same size as the ones Kwon Taekjoo usually wore. Amidst the clothes was an unloaded pistol and a knife that Zhenya had once gifted to Kwon Taekjoo.

Zhenya buried his face in the bag and inhaled deeply. The sharp, acrid smell of gunpowder was the first thing he noticed, followed by the faint but familiar scent of Kwon Taekjoo.

Kwon Taekjoo was here, so close to him. Zhenya just had to wait a little longer. When they reunited, he would hold him tight and never let go. He would make Kwon Taekjoo pay for making him feel so disoriented and anxious. The mere thought sent a tingling sensation to the tips of Zhenya's fingers, and a wave of emotions flooded his heart.

Suddenly, a deafening explosion shook the building. Both Zhenya and the warden looked up, startled by the unexpected blast. It almost seemed like an illusion, but more explosions followed in rapid succession, sending a shower of loose dust falling from the ceiling. The alarm lights throughout the building flickered on, and a loud siren began blaring. The director's phone, previously silent, started ringing desperately.

A deep sense of foreboding seized Zhenya.

"Taekjoo," he murmured under his breath before immediately rushing out of the room.

"Aah, this is going to drive me crazy."

Kwon Taekjoo pressed himself against the wall as he surveyed the silent corridor. It was well into the night, so there was no sound of anyone nearby. The only issue was the security camera installed in the ceiling. Although most of the prison’s equipment was outdated, the cameras appeared to be the only thing that was state-of-the-art. They tracked every movement and eliminated almost all blind spots. Perhaps many others before him had tried to escape the same way.

Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t find any sewage systems or ventilation ducts, which were usually installed in most buildings. There was absolutely nowhere to hide. At this rate, escaping without being detected seemed impossible.

His only option now was to move straight ahead and hope the guards didn’t find him suspicious.

Keeping his movements stealthy, Kwon Taekjoo crept slowly down the corridor. As expected, the ceiling camera immediately focused on his movements. The security room’s feed would only show a guard in uniform, so all he had to do was avoid doing anything that would draw attention.

It wasn’t too hard to figure out where the exit was. The farther he went, the thinner the walls became, and the larger the windows. Even the lights that illuminated the hallway grew brighter. It was a clear sign that he was getting closer to the outside world.

As Kwon Taekjoo moved through the hallways, guided only by his instinct, he couldn’t help but feel confused as to why everything seemed so familiar. In fact, he had been wondering this ever since he woke up. Who was he really, and what kind of life had he lived? Why did attacking an adversary or finding an escape route feel so natural to him? Why was he in Iran, and why was he running?

In addition to his recent injuries, his body was covered in both large and small scars. They were undeniable proof of his exposure to violence, just like the recent terrorist attack. Was he a soldier in the armed forces? No, the guards had hinted that he had ties to Russia, which meant he might have been an international mercenary or a conflict resolver.

Did he have family? A home to return to? The questions piled up relentlessly, but the answers remained elusive. Maybe he had been trying too hard to remember something, because soon an intense headache overcame him. The pain didn’t come from the wound on the back of his head... it felt more like an overwhelming pressure squeezing his brain from the inside.

"Agh..."

His vision instantly blurred, making him lean against the wall for a moment. He tilted his head back and began to breathe deeply. Soon, his whole body broke out in a cold sweat.

Now he was relying on his instinct to escape the prison, but where would he go after that? Was there even anywhere he could return to? Kwon Taekjoo felt hopeless. He wasn’t sure if the world beyond the prison walls was a safe place, and there were no guarantees that enemies weren’t waiting for him out there.

He lowered his head. Even if a greater danger awaited him outside, it was better than staying here waiting for his death. He knew he wasn’t the type of person who would sit around hoping some grand figure would rescue him. Life continued to flow and move forward. If someone stumbled and fell behind, they just had to run and make up for lost time.

So, instead of staying here waiting, he needed to take at least one more step forward. If he failed in his escape now, he might never get another chance.

Kwon Taekjoo pressed his hat firmly against his head and walked quickly, his strides echoing on the floor. He easily passed through various security doors, using Ahmad’s identification card and keys to get through.

But, of course, it wasn’t all smooth sailing. Kwon Taekjoo turned a corner when, suddenly, he froze and stepped back. He peered around cautiously to assess the situation on the other side. The first thing that caught his attention was the double-layer security door ahead. Two guards stood on either side. Beyond the door was a long hallway leading to another building. Although the night’s darkness made it difficult to see clearly, the cool air circulating in the corridor made it obvious it led outside.

The guard on the inner side of the door was smiling, absorbed in something on his phone, while the other guard seemed to be dozing in a chair. Security had clearly relaxed, as it was almost impossible for a prisoner to escape, and even if one did, few would dare to take this route.

After weighing his options, Kwon Taekjoo rummaged through his pockets and pulled out a gold tooth, probably something Ahmad had taken from another prisoner.

He rolled it between his fingers before tossing it lightly onto the floor. The tooth made a soft clink as it hit the ground. The guard looking at his phone tilted his head at the sound. He spotted the tooth and walked over toward where Kwon Taekjoo was hiding against the wall.

"Who dropped this?" he murmured to himself, looking around before reaching down to pick it up.

In that instant, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed the guard's arm, slamming his face against the wall and driving his knee into the guard's ribs. The attack was quick and sudden, leaving the guard paralyzed, unable to even gasp. Kwon Taekjoo finished him off with a swift blow to the back of the neck. He dragged the unconscious man behind the wall and took his access card for the double-layer security door.

The only remaining obstacle was the dozing guard on the other side of the door. Kwon Taekjoo took a deep breath and moved directly toward him. From now on, it was a race against time. His pace quickened with every step.

"Hm? Where'd you go without saying anything?"

Just as Kwon Taekjoo approached the door, the drowsy guard woke up and turned toward him.

"…Ah."

"I asked you. Where did you go?"

Kwon Taekjoo couldn't give him an answer. His voice would instantly give him away as not being his fellow guard. As the silence stretched between them, the guard slowly stood up. Tension filled the air.

"Huh? Wait, you're not Mohammed."

The guard approached the door and looked at the name tag on Kwon Taekjoo's uniform.

"Ahmad? What are you doing here? And where's Mohammed?"

"....."

"You little bastard, something's off about you. Take off your hat."

When Kwon Taekjoo stood still, the guard pushed his baton through the bars of the door, the tip lifting Kwon Taekjoo's hat.

"Huh? You're...?"

As a look of confusion crossed the guard's face, Kwon Taekjoo yanked forcefully on the baton. The guard stumbled forward with it, slamming his nose into the bars and losing his balance. Without hesitation, Kwon Taekjoo struck him in the face with the baton. The guard grabbed his left eye with both hands.

"AAARGH! My eye!"

His scream quickly turned into rage as he drew his weapon.

"I'm gonna kill you!"

Just as he was about to recklessly pull the trigger in his fury, a deafening explosion shook the ground, blinding him with a flash of white light. Instinctively, Kwon Taekjoo ducked, covering his head with his arms. Even while lying on the ground, several more explosions followed, rattling the entire building. Soon, the shrill wail of sirens echoed throughout the prison.

"Cough, cough… shit, what the hell?"

Kwon Taekjoo pushed himself up through the thick dust cloud and lifted his head. The ceiling lights had been damaged, plunging the area into darkness. He could only see a short distance ahead.

The security door was now bent, likely from the earlier explosions, leaving a narrow gap through which Kwon Taekjoo could slip. The spot where the guard had been standing moments before was buried under a pile of rubble. Kwon Taekjoo grabbed the weapon from the hand that stuck out from among the debris.

Suddenly, a voice shouted from a distance: ***"Fire! There's a fire!"***

Kwon Taekjoo had no idea what was happening, but it worked in his favor. Without hesitation, he sprinted down the hallway. The guards, too stunned by the chaos, didn't even notice him.

A fire must have truly started because the air grew thick with heat and smoke. The prisoners who had been asleep were now awake, screaming for help as they scrambled in panic. Amid all the commotion, the explosions continued to reverberate in the background, turning the prison into a hellish nightmare.

Kwon Taekjoo ignored the chaos and pushed forward, but suddenly, part of the ceiling collapsed right in front of him. He barely managed to roll out of the way in time.

TAEKJOOOO

Just as he was about to get up and run again, a ferocious roar echoed in the distance. He couldn't help but flinch and turn around, but all he saw behind him was darkness and dust.

The sound didn't repeat.

He stood there for a moment, stunned, before snapping back to reality. There was no time to waste. He turned around and rushed into the darkness.

By the time Zhenya left the warden's office, the corridor had descended into chaos. The lights were out, and the building trembled from the continuous explosions. Cracks spread across the ceiling and walls, causing debris to rain down. Every alarm in the facility blared, and the emergency light beams flickered erratically, casting a strobe of light across his vision.

Where had the explosions started? Had Kwon Taekjoo tried to escape amidst all this chaos?

As Zhenya assessed the situation, he plunged into the prison pavilion, tearing through security doors with brute force or neutralizing them with his weapon. The guards he crossed paths with were too busy fleeing or desperately trying to put out flames with fire extinguishers. The prisoners, still locked in their cells, pressed their faces against the bars of the narrow windows, shouting for help.

"There's a fire!"

A heart-wrenching scream pushed Zhenya to quicken his pace. But the smoke was thickening. Zhenya moved through the chaotic corridor, inspecting each cell, but Kwon Taekjoo was nowhere to be found. With too many cells to check and the view growing dimmer by the second, he began to worry that he might never find Kwon Taekjoo. His teeth clenched, and a fresh wave of anxiety gripped him. It felt like he was sinking deeper into a hopeless abyss, but if Kwon Taekjoo was waiting for him at the end, it didn't seem so bad.

Another deafening explosion shook the building, causing the ceiling to collapse. Desperate screams and cries erupted from all directions, coming from those still trapped inside.

If Kwon Taekjoo was tied up and locked away somewhere, even he would struggle to survive this. Zhenya had been so close, he thought he had finally caught up to him... Was he really going to lose Kwon Taekjoo once again? His hopelessness exploded in a furious roar.

"TAEKJOOOOO!"

Zhenya shouted his name again and again as he ventured deeper into the prison. The smoke-filled air clung to his throat, slowly suffocating his breath, but it couldn't stop his feet from driving him forward, deeper into the facility.

Like a bulldozer, he pushed on until something made him stop. A familiar scent lingered, mingling with the acrid air. Was it a hallucination? Was his desperation to find Kwon Taekjoo playing tricks on him? Zhenya scanned his surroundings urgently, but he couldn't sense anyone nearby.

"Taekjoo...," he whispered, turning around.

Zhenya began to follow the faint scent, blindly trusting the trail. He was taking a risky gamble.

Every hallway he passed was filled with unconscious guards. They were all alive, still breathing. Whoever had attacked them had been careful not to kill them, targeting only pressure points with precision. It was exactly the kind of thing Kwon Taekjoo would do. Zhenya was becoming more and more certain that Kwon Taekjoo was truly here.

He frantically chased Kwon Taekjoo's scent, pushing his way through the now-chaotic prison facilities, completely thrown into disarray by fire and explosions. He barreled through anything or anyone that got in his path, tossing them aside. Soon, he reached the main exit and forced the door open with a single shove.

As he shot out into the open, a police vehicle, responding to emergency calls, screeched to a halt. Zhenya had been running with his gaze fixed ahead when the vehicle's bumper struck him, sending him stumbling backward. He sharply turned his head, his eyes flashing with a chilling and intense coldness. His gaze seemed almost inhuman.

"E-Excuse me, sir. Are you okay?" the officer at the wheel asked, poking his head out of the window. Zhenya stared at him in silence for a moment before he turned and ran off again without saying a word. The officer shouted after him, trying to get him to stop, but Zhenya didn't hear him.

The scene outside the prison was a total disaster. Police officers, firefighters, running guards, and escaping prisoners formed an uncontrollable crowd. With everyone running in a frenzy, the fire truck couldn't even get close to the building.

"Move out of the way! Everyone over there, get moving!"

Zhenya shoved past officers trying to block his way and sprinted in search of Kwon Taekjoo, only to stop dead in his tracks. The scent of Kwon Taekjoo had faded into the air. In its place, there was an emergency worker, looking around in confusion. It seemed like they were looking for something... like an ambulance.

Zhenya recalled when Kwon Taekjoo had stolen a fire truck to escape after blowing up the "Anastasia" plan. Could he have pulled the same trick again?

"Mr. Yevgeny! Are you alright?"

Yoon Jongwoo, who had been waiting outside, pulled up beside him in a car. Zhenya looked at him silently for a moment before suddenly grabbing him by the collar and pulling him forward.

"Ah! Why are you doing this?!"

"Where is Taekjoo?"

"What? Sunbae? Did you see him?"

"I'm asking if you saw him."

"... I mean, all I heard was a huge explosion before everyone started evacuating..."

“Out.”

Zhenya yanked Yoon Jongwoo out of the car and checked his phone, still mounted on the dashboard. But there was still no signal on the tracking app.

He threw the phone aside in frustration and climbed into the driver’s seat. Yoon Jongwoo quickly slid into the passenger seat, knowing it was best not to ask any questions. Before he could even close the door, the vehicle shot forward, heading straight for the prison gates. But before they could get much further, they were met with police cars blocking the exit.

“Stop!”

An officer waved his flashlight and ordered them to shut off the engine and step out. Every second they wasted meant Kwon Taekjoo was getting further away.

Zhenya slammed his foot on the accelerator, even as the police signaled for them to stop. The vehicle surged forward, crashing through the makeshift blockade of police cars. Yoon Jongwoo let out a scream and covered his head with his hands.

At their clearly suspicious behavior, one of the police cars blared its sirens and gave chase. After repeatedly ordering them to stop, the officer fired a few warning shots. But Zhenya remained unfazed, pressing even harder on the accelerator and driving recklessly forward. Meanwhile, his mind raced, wondering where Kwon Taekjoo could be hiding. His eyes darted back and forth, scanning the road for any sign of an abandoned ambulance or a familiar figure.

Soon, a towering bronze statue appeared ahead, surrounded by a roundabout that split into five different roads.

“Aahh, aah”

The heavy breath Zhenya had been holding back escaped in a rush. His eyes blinked anxiously between the five different paths before he slammed his fist into the steering wheel, unable to bear his overwhelming frustration. The steering wheel bent to one side from the force of the impact. Yoon Jongwoo, who had been covering his head the entire time, slowly lifted his gaze. His eyes widened in shock at seeing a side of Zhenya he had never seen before.

Zhenya’s desperate, nervous gaze flickered frantically between the five diverging roads. His hopeless expression reminded Yoon Jongwoo of a lost child, abandoned in an immense and unknown land.

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Chapter End Notes

Support the author by purchasing the novel on Ridibooks.

Run Go Run

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•PERSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Kwon Taekjoo used a thin wire to unlock the front door. Once inside, he paused near the entrance, listening carefully for any sounds. Fortunately, it seemed that no one was home.

To prevent anyone from entering too easily if they returned, he wrapped the wire tightly around the lock. Then he went into the bathroom to take a shower. As the water ran down his body, it washed away the soot, dust, and blood that had accumulated on his skin. After cleaning himself thoroughly—even inside his ears—he threw on the first clothes he could find. He sat down on the sofa, towel-drying his damp hair. He let out a deep sigh, wishing he could simply drift off to sleep right there. But fresh blood was seeping from the wound on his side, making rest impossible.

He pulled out a medical kit he'd taken from an ambulance, stocked with more professional supplies and tools than a standard first-aid kit. Kwon Taekjoo started with antiseptic and suturing thread. Holding a thick roll of bandages between his teeth, he poured antiseptic onto the open wound where blood still flowed. The sting made him clench his jaw, veins popping on his forehead. After a deep breath, he pressed down on the wound with gauze for pressure, then injected a painkiller around the area with a syringe. Each step was a wave of agony, but it was nothing compared to the pain of stitching raw, un-numbed flesh.

"Ugh... agh..."

Clamping the bandage tightly between his teeth, he stitched the wound closed. His fingers trembled from the intense pain. Getting proper medical treatment in a safer place might have been wiser, but with all the blood he'd lost, he knew he wouldn't make it far before collapsing.

After slowly finishing the stitches, he pressed gauze over the wound to secure it. A shaky breath escaped him, and his molars—and even his gums—throbbed from clenching the bandage so hard. As he quickly packed up the medical kit, he caught a glimpse of himself in its small mirror. He looked awful. It was a wonder he was still able to keep moving in such a state. He could only hope his body would hold out until he found somewhere secure. Likely from the infection spreading through his body, he felt a low fever coming on. He pulled out an antibiotic and injected it, then swallowed a few fever-reducing pills.

With the worst taken care of, he suddenly felt hunger gnawing at him. Rubbing his now hollow-feeling stomach, he made his way to the kitchen. In the fridge, he found some cold lavash and gormeh sabzi, a type of vegetable curry. He didn't bother reheating them—he simply stuffed the food into his mouth. Right now, his priority was filling his stomach and conserving energy.

As he chewed, he skimmed the morning newspaper left on one corner of the dining table. The front page covered the explosion and fire at Evin Prison last night. Authorities had provisionally concluded that it was an attack orchestrated by IS-K, a branch of the Islamic State known as Islamic State-Khorasan. Since the prison primarily held anti-government dissidents, it seemed the attack was aimed at helping them escape. Additionally, IS-K was suspected to be behind a recent armed assault targeting Iranian and Russian officials in downtown Tehran. Many detainees arrested after the Tehran attack had reportedly escaped amid last night's chaos.

IS-K was infamous as one of the most extreme and violent jihadi factions among Islamic fundamentalists. Even before the Tehran attack, they had staged brutal incidents, like coordinating simultaneous shootings and suicide bombings at sites such as the Khomeini Mausoleum and the parliament.

While reading the article, he suddenly remembered information about how ISIS recruited new members through social media worldwide, primarily targeting young people with a strong sense of pride. In reality, ISIS placed no restrictions on the nationalities of its recruits; they brought in young foreigners to turn them into revolutionary fighters or sometimes held them as hostages.

Could Kwon Taekjoo have been one of them? If that were the case, it would explain his fluency in Persian, his exceptional combat skills, and the fact that he was found at the scene of the attack in Tehran. But he simply couldn't accept it. Had Kwon Taekjoo led acts of violence that harmed innocent people under some absurd pretext? Just the thought made him feel uncomfortable and disgusted. What kind of mindset, or what circumstances, could lead someone to do such a thing?

"Ugh…"

As he tried to delve into the essence of his being, once again, a headache struck him. It felt like an intense pressure building up intermittently in his brainstem, squeezing memories trapped behind a thick wall, letting only small fragments leak through. Blurry, fragmented images began to emerge, though he couldn't be certain if they were real or not.

He saw flashes of himself in military uniform, armed, crossing a dark sea in a boat; then, rappelling down from a helicopter into dense jungle; and later, skiing at high speed across a vast snowy plain, as if he were being chased. Each scene appeared in isolation, like watching a reel of film projected frame by frame, with no clear connection between them. Disconnected voices from these images echoed in his mind over and over, drumming against his skull in a constant hum. It was as if he were losing his sanity, unable to stop these hallucinations by sheer willpower.

"Congratulations on passing. I knew you'd make it, son."

"Take good care of your mother."

"Would you like to go out with me?"

"Congratulations on completing your first mission."

"Why do you keep trying to escape? It's not like I'm trying to kill you."

"Pleasure to meet you. I'm Olga."

"Where are you, sunbae? Are you okay? They said you were here last night. The mood at headquarters is a disaster. Almost everyone thinks you're a terrorist!"

A flood of memories surfaced in his mind like mushrooms sprouting after rain, triggering an intense headache. His mind was so overwhelmed by chaotic thoughts that the pressure in his brain kept mounting. His vision blurred, and it felt like his head might explode at any moment.

"Ah, damn it…"

He clutched his head as if it were about to split, writhing in pain. His mind quickly tangled, as if overloaded, and his breathing became shallow. His vision flickered non-stop. Each time he tried to force the memories; the same sharp pain struck him.

"Ugh…"

Finally, feeling nauseated, he rushed to the bathroom. He clung to the toilet, vomiting everything he had eaten. His stomach convulsed with such force that it seemed like everything was going to force its way up his narrow throat. Inside, he was completely churned up, aching in an indescribable way.

"Haa, haa…"

Kwon Taekjoo breathed heavily, still clinging to the toilet as he tried to calm himself. Cold sweat trickled down his back and neck. Closing his eyes tightly, he worked to steady his breathing. Gradually, his vision, which had been completely blurred, began to clear.

With effort, he managed to stand, though his legs felt weak. He steadied himself against the sink, catching his breath before washing his face and brushing his teeth. Even after rinsing his mouth several times and scrubbing his tongue and cheeks, the nauseating feeling lingered.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and left the bathroom, heading straight to the room with the computer. Sitting down in front of it, he powered it on. As the system booted up, a password prompt appeared on the screen. He searched through the desk and bookshelf, soon finding a note with the birthdate of the room's owner. He entered the numbers, but the system returned an error message, indicating the password was incorrect.

He scanned the room more carefully. Inside a drawer, he found a photograph of a man and woman who looked close. They held a cake and smiled, likely taken during a celebration.

What caught Kwon Taekjoo's attention was the digital clock on the wall in the background of the photo. It displayed the date, day of the week, and time. Squinting, he noted the date on the clock in the picture. When he entered those numbers as the password, he was finally able to unlock the system. Turns out, the owner of the room was a bit of a romantic, which made Kwon's task easier.

"Your birthday's coming up. Is there something you'd like to receive?"

Kwon Taekjoo gave a faint smile at the memory, but suddenly a thought crossed his mind, accompanied by a sharp sensation in his inner thigh. More precisely, where he had a tattoo in Cyrillic script.

"My Anastasia."

That's what the tattoo read. The handwriting was rough, as if it had been inscribed by hand. What did it mean? Was it referring to himself or someone else?

As he continued to reflect, Kwon Taekjoo shook his head, pushing those thoughts aside. He didn't have time to get lost in distractions. As a fugitive, he couldn't afford to stay in one place for long.

Resolute, he connected to the internet. His current location was Tehran, Iran. The first thing he needed to do was ensure his safety. His long-term goal was to return to his home country and find out who he truly was.

The problem was the significant distance to South Korea, and with his current uncertain identity, entering the country would be challenging. Although Tehran had a South Korean embassy, he wasn't sure it was wise to seek help there. If he really was a criminal, the embassy wouldn't be a safe place. Plus, he doubted they'd protect him if he were pursued as a terrorism suspect.

He needed to find somewhere else. Somewhere safer than Iran, from where he could eventually reach South Korea, and close enough to move in his current state.

Where would be suitable? He opened a world map on the screen, searching for a place that fit his criteria. Traveling across multiple borders without identification or money was nearly impossible. In the Middle East, his East Asian appearance would make him stand out, making it difficult to hide.

In the end, only one option remained.

Turkey.

A country that wasn't fully allied or fully opposed in the polarized world. A place where Europeans and Asians mixed, and where movement was relatively unrestricted. There didn't seem to be a better option.

Determined, Kwon Taekjoo immediately erased the computer's activity history. Then, he shut down the machine and left the apartment quietly.

In the vast, snowy landscape, a small black dot stood out in the distance. At first, he thought it might be a rock and observed it curiously. However, after a few moments, the black dot seemed to shift slightly. Unsure if he had really seen it move, he decided to get closer to confirm. But suddenly, the creature began to flee at high speed. With its long, powerful legs, it bounded swiftly through the snow. It was a rabbit.

"Zainka?"

He murmured breathlessly. Hearing his voice, the rabbit, running wildly, paused for a moment. Its long ears perked up as it looked in Zhenya's direction. Almost instinctively, he took a step toward it. Startled, the rabbit took off again, and Zhenya pursued it. What began as a hesitant step quickly turned into a full sprint. His pupils narrowed, focused like a hunter on its prey.

Soon, they reached a dense birch forest. The black rabbit darted nimbly between the trunks, and the dark knots on the trees cast shadows that created an illusion, making the chase more difficult. Zhenya knew that when the pursuit got challenging, the best tactic was to cut ahead. He raced through the forest, positioning himself in front of the rabbit, blocking its escape with his arms wide open. But instead of stopping, the rabbit leapt into the air.

In the blink of an eye, its limbs stretched, and before Zhenya's eyes, the rabbit transformed into a black leopard. Effortlessly, the leopard vaulted over his head. Stunned, Zhenya spun around, feeling a fresh surge of adrenaline, and resumed his pursuit, driven by a blind force he couldn't explain.

Before long, a towering cliff loomed in front of the leopard. It looked like the chase was over. The animal, now cornered, paced anxiously near the edge of the precipice. Zhenya didn't rush. He gradually slowed down, approaching cautiously.

Just as he was about to reach the leopard, a sudden strong gust of wind forced him to close his eyes. When he opened them again, he heard the flapping of wings above him. The black leopard had vanished, and in its place, a black hawk rose swiftly with the wind, escaping before he could react.

"Stop right there!" Zhenya shouted.

Fearing he might lose sight of the hawk, Zhenya scrambled up to higher ground. He climbed the steep ridge with bare hands, feeling the terrain grow steeper beneath him. In his haste, he

reached for an unstable protrusion, and finding no firm grip, he slipped precariously. Regaining his balance, he looked down almost by accident.

What he saw left him speechless: beneath his feet stretched a dizzying urban landscape. The mountain he'd been climbing had transformed into a skyscraper. Hundreds of police cars with flashing red lights surrounded the building. Above, helicopters buzzed in all directions, lighting up the scene with powerful beams.

The black hawk reached the top of the skyscraper in a single flight. As it folded its large wings, its silhouette transformed into a human figure. It was Kwon Taekjoo. There he was, standing on the edge of the rooftop, dangerously close to the brink, wearing a mask of a comical character. The helicopters' spotlights focused on him all at once, and in an instant, Kwon's body was covered in red dots from sniper lasers.

"Surrender and drop your weapons. Surrender and drop your weapons."

Blaring sirens and robotic warnings echoed from below. Kwon Taekjoo tossed his gun without resistance. The weapon passed quickly by Zhenya before plummeting to the ground. Immediately, gunfire erupted from all sides, hitting Kwon Taekjoo before he could even attempt to shield himself.

In an instant, Kwon Taekjoo, bloodied, fell toward the abyss. As he passed by Zhenya, time seemed to slow. It was as if they were suspended in a void, separated only by a single moment. The mask Kwon wore was soaked in blood, and his pale lips moved faintly behind it.

"Zhenya."

Zhenya desperately reached out to catch him but couldn't even brush against him. Kwon Taekjoo's body continued to fall, breaking apart as it descended.

"……!"

His eyes flew open wide. His vision quickly cleared, though he felt a faint dizziness. His heart beat irregularly, and his heavy breathing echoed in his ears. He felt uneasy. Trying to sit up, the discomfort made him feel nauseous. Biting down hard, he swallowed the bitterness. Tilting his head back, he covered his eyes with his hands. Maybe from the tension, his fingertips were numb. His long exhale also shook uncomfortably.

When he slowly opened his eyes, he noticed his eyelashes were damp—something rare for him. His neck and back were also wet. Had he been sweating in his sleep? He rarely dreamed, and even more rarely had nightmares. He usually woke after a deep sleep that left him fully restored, giving him high sleep quality. Besides, nightmares were remnants of the subconscious in those who knew fear. Only those who feared losing something precious were affected by such illusions. He'd never experienced that kind of terror in his life—until he met Kwon Taekjoo.

Where was Kwon Taekjoo now? Was he as anxious as Zhenya? Did he still think about him? If so, why hadn't there been any news? His worry for his indifferent lover was turning into a

growing resentment.

Just then, the phone rang unexpectedly. Zhenya picked it up quickly and checked the caller ID. It was a disappointing call from Bazim. Normally, he would have rejected the call without a second thought, but maybe Bazim had some encouraging news this time. With faint hope, he answered.

"What happened? Was this your doing?"

Bazim asked right away, his tone uneasy. Zhenya had received a request to cooperate from him before heading to Evin Prison. The only reason he hadn't resorted to force was to retrieve Kwon Taekjoo as quickly and smoothly as possible.

But then, just as Zhenya visited the prison, the incident happened. After the fire, Kwon Taekjoo had vanished again, and Zhenya was in a desperate situation. Although he was more frustrated than anyone, it seemed absurd that Bazim was so quick to blame him.

"Do you really think that?" Zhenya replied.

"Isn't it? Are you sure?"

"Why ask if you're not going to believe me?"

"Haaa... Be more convincing. You said you'd cooperate and keep things quiet. Why did you cause a mess at the hospital? You went up against the police for no reason. Why so much noise for just one person?"

"That person isn't easy to handle."

In reality, it had already been two days since Zhenya had lost track of Kwon Taekjoo. So far, his whereabouts were still a mystery. He had checked all security cameras, even civilian ones, just as he had when he first pursued him, but apart from knowing that Kwon had abandoned the stolen ambulance near a fire station and then escaped, there was no further information.

There had been no news from the National Intelligence Agency, the South Korean embassy, or Yoon Jongwoo. The same applied to Zhenya. It was strange. If Kwon Taekjoo had managed to escape and was hiding somewhere, he would have sent word in some way. At this point in the operation, his only goal should have been to "return safely."

But he had given no sign of life for two days. Had he been captured while fleeing and was now being held somewhere? No, if that were the case, there would have been some indication of his arrest. Although he was monitoring police communications 24/7, there were no reports of anyone resembling Kwon Taekjoo.

"If you really want me out of the way as soon as possible, stop wasting time insisting like this and genuinely cooperate. I already told you I just want to recover what's mine and leave immediately."

He ended the call after giving his reprimand. He ignored the phone as it started ringing again.

He rose from his seat and left the room. Yoon Jongwoo lay on the living room couch, his neck twisted awkwardly, almost passed out. Not surprising, since he hadn't had a restful sleep since arriving in Iran. Though he seemed clumsy, he was somewhat useful. Zhenya now understood why Kwon Taekjoo had been so insistent on keeping him close.

"Hey."

Even when called, Yoon Jongwoo didn't wake up right away. How could someone from an intelligence agency be this slow? Annoyed, Zhenya banged on the table. Yoon Jongwoo, startled, jolted awake, hitting his knee against the table.

"Oh! Mr. Yevgeny! What time is it...?"

"What have you found?"

"Ah, I'm still investigating, but... the area is too wide this time. I haven't found anything significant yet."

Yoon Jongwoo lowered his head, visibly embarrassed. Now that it had been confirmed that Kwon Taekjoo was alive, he no longer seemed so desperate.

"Why is Taekjoo still running?"

"Huh? Well, because he's being chased, I suppose."

"Chased? By who?"

Yoon Jongwoo, about to respond, froze, looking dumbfounded. In reality, Kwon Taekjoo was not being pursued at the moment. Although he was taken to Evin Prison on suspicion of terrorism, thanks to the cooperation letter Zhenya had obtained, all charges against him had been cleared. Even though he'd escaped in the chaos caused by the fire, the Iranian government was no longer pursuing him.

Moreover, several media outlets had already reported the collapse of the prison system due to recent events. So far, the prison hadn't determined who was dead, injured, or missing. Kwon Taekjoo must have heard about this, so why was he still running?

"If he's already a free man, he could ask for help if he wanted to. The South Korean embassy isn't far from here. If he's unable to do that, he should have at least contacted you."

Zhenya continued questioning. According to him, Kwon Taekjoo should have reported his survival as soon as he was safe. If he couldn't return on his own, he should have requested support from the base. There was a support base for deployed agents in Iran, yet he hadn't attempted to contact Kwon Taekjoo there either.

"I even tried logging into my personal email and all my game accounts, just in case. But I didn't find a trace of him anywhere. I also called Mr. Taekjoo's mother to check on her, but she asked if I'd heard anything from him."

The ominous feeling intensified. Kwon Taekjoo was capable of driving more than 20 km. Despite that, he hadn't contacted even his mother in two days. The man who had always been so cautious about her, even in the worst circumstances. What could this mean?

It seemed that more information about Kwon Taekjoo's status was needed. To do that, Zhenya had to find the last person who had seen him. He grabbed his coat and headed for the exit.

"Huh? Where are you going?"

"You keep searching. Report immediately if you find anything."

After giving instructions to Yoon Jongwoo, who tried to follow him, Zhenya walked out of the hotel.

Omar couldn't sleep, tossing and turning in bed, restless. His fellow guard, Ahmad, had died during a prisoner interrogation, and now he was facing intense questioning day after day. Following the prison director's orders, Omar had gone to find Ahmad, who was already unconscious at the time, and had admitted honestly that he himself had been knocked out by the prisoner's attack and didn't know what happened afterward.

During the investigation, he'd learned that the eastern prisoner Ahmad had been torturing was on a list of names that Russia had intervened to save. Supposedly, on the day of the fire, a high-ranking Russian diplomat had come personally to pick him up.

The prison administration, though uneasy about the disappearance of the eastern prisoner, seemed privately relieved. Everyone knew how ruthlessly Ahmad had tortured prisoners. The eastern prisoner had endured Ahmad's interrogations at least four times. If Russia found out about this, they'd surely raise human rights violation issues. With the prisoner's current "disappearance," they could instead argue that any injuries from torture had happened during his escape.

The cause of Ahmad's death was provisionally listed as smoke inhalation from the fire. Only after swearing not to reveal anything about it was Omar released.

"Ugh..."

He sighed and was about to lie back down when he felt a strange unease. Turning his head, he was startled to see a pair of intense blue eyes glowing in the dark. He froze, feeling as if he'd seen a ghost. Was it a beast? No, it was clearly human. How had they gotten in? The door was locked.

Every question increased his fear. The figure moved closer with a piercing gaze, as if looking right through him. Sitting down in a nearby chair, the figure's eyes never left Omar's. Every movement was slow and calm, yet there was something intimidating in his presence.

Omar's limbs went rigid. It was the kind of overwhelming dominance that someone who had broken others' spirits for a long time could exert. If he tried to resist or deceive this man, he

wouldn’t survive.

“I’ll ask you one question, so answer it.”

Was this extreme terror? The voice sounded terrifyingly sinister. Unable to speak, Omar nodded quickly.

“You remember the missing eastern prisoner, don’t you?”

“Uh? Oh, yes, yes!”

He forced his voice out as his tongue seemed to curl into his throat.

“Was there anything unusual?”

“Unusual...?”

“Just answer.”

The presence before him was so tense it was as if a blade was at his throat. Even breathing felt risky.

Omar thought quickly about how to survive. This man was looking for the missing eastern prisoner. Though he’d promised to keep quiet about everything concerning him, in this life-or-death situation, he wondered what that promise even meant.

“I... I think he was a terrorism suspect. When he was found, he was armed, and his identity was unclear, so he was brought to our prison after receiving first aid. The hospital said he’d suffered a serious head injury, so it was unclear if he could speak clearly... In fact, he couldn’t properly explain who he was or where he came from.”

The man listening nodded, and Omar felt like he was getting closer to the information the man wanted. He took the opportunity to add his personal opinion.

“He seemed frustrated and confused. Even though he could’ve come up with a story to get by, he stayed silent. I wondered if he’d really lost his memory.”

“Lost his memory…?”

“I’m not sure, but it’s possible.”

The man leaned back slightly, his sharp gaze becoming even more intense. Omar dropped to his knees, pleading with his hands together.

“Please, sir! I swear I’ve done nothing wrong! I just followed orders. I haven’t laid a finger on him! Please, just let me live!”

“You?”

The man grabbed Omar's ponytail sharply, making him wince as if he'd been stabbed in the head.

"Does that mean someone else did?"

"That person's already dead! He got the punishment he deserved! If you want to know who he was, I'll tell you everything! Please, just let me live!"

"What did he do?"

"What? He... he just conducted interrogations…"

"This country isn't exactly known for its courtesy. Especially that prison; you only leave there dead or as an invalid. Isn't that right?"

"It's not true! It's a misunderstanding, sir! I swear by Allah, I did nothing!"

"If that were true, your god would take note."

Muttering words that Omar couldn't understand, the man suddenly grabbed Omar's jaw and forced it open. Though he tried to keep his mouth shut, it was no use. Soon, an unknown pill was pressed against his tongue. The man then shut Omar's mouth tightly, blocking both his nose and mouth at once. As the lack of air grew unbearable, his lungs forced him to inhale, and the pill slipped down his throat uncontrollably. The powerful effect of the pill made Omar faint, his eyes rolling back.

The man let go of Omar's head, which he'd been holding with one hand. Just then, the once-silent phone began to ring. As he answered the call, Yoon Jongwoo's urgent voice came through clearly.

"Mr. Yevgeny! Where are you? We've tracked the senior officer's route! He's on his way to Tabriz! It looks like he's heading toward Turkey."

Hearing this news, Zhenya left Omar's house as quietly as he had entered.

At the border between Iran and Turkey, Tabriz is a city that, once a crucial point on the ancient Silk Road, remains a key hub for trade and transportation between the two countries. Kwon Taekjoo, wearing a black niqab that revealed only their eyes, watched the activity at the immigration office closely.

Was it the city's distance from the capital, Tehran, that influenced this? Despite the recent large-scale terrorist attack that had shaken the nation, the border controls in this region were relatively lax. Perhaps the fact that those responsible for the attacks had been identified had lowered the alert level.

Iran and Turkey maintain active political and economic exchanges, so the border between them wasn't under particularly rigorous surveillance. Border guards greeted tourists and merchants trying to cross into Turkey with relaxed expressions.

It was known that moving from Iran to Turkey was relatively easy, at least for foreigners with clear identities or for goods that had been declared beforehand. But for Kwon Taekjoo, who didn't fit into either category, the only option was to attempt illegal immigration. A 220-kilometer wall, built to block Kurdish forces and refugees, now stood in the way. Additionally, high-tech surveillance systems operated around the area, making it impossible to cross undetected. The safest option seemed to be hiding in a transport vehicle.

Tabriz had the largest bazaar in Iran, making it a bustling point for moving goods to neighboring countries. As a result, trucks were everywhere in the city.

Looking for a suitable truck, Kwon Taekjoo settled in a modest restaurant. Even if they managed to cross into Turkey without incident, they didn't know how long it would take to reach the city. It was wise to eat first to avoid fainting along the journey.

"Are you really going to eat all this alone? Isn't it too much?"

The restaurant owner widened his eyes when he took the order. Instead of responding, Kwon Taekjoo simply nodded. The owner repeated the question in disbelief:

"Are you sure you want all this?"

Again, Kwon Taekjoo nodded. Finally, the owner headed back to the kitchen, casting curious glances their way as he left. It wasn't so unusual to order a lot of food, but in Iran, seeing a niqab that only revealed the eyes or a chador covering the whole body was uncommon. In Afghanistan, however, such attire was standard, so it wasn't entirely strange. What drew attention was that an Afghan woman was here alone without a male escort, and her height, taller than average, caught people's attention.

It wasn't just the restaurant owner who looked on with curiosity. A man at the next table was also watching Kwon Taekjoo with suspicion, though his attention shifted when the owner placed food in front of them.

"Heading to Kayseri again today? I won't see you for another week."

"Oh? You'll miss me that much?"

The man replied playfully, giving the owner a pat on the backside. The owner brushed his hand away and returned to the kitchen. The man watched him go, then turned his gaze back, meeting Kwon Taekjoo's eyes and smiled broadly. Kwon Taekjoo flipped him off through the niqab.

"You too, miss. It's a long journey, so eat well."

Soon, Kwon Taekjoo's table was covered with the food they'd ordered. He nodded slightly to the owner and began to eat. The challenge was that eating required pulling down the niqab, all while being careful not to stain its inside with food. It was a complicated process that made him curse silently.

After filling up, he left the money on the table and stepped outside. He didn't have much cash left, just enough to buy water for the journey ahead. He found a suitable shop and headed into the bazaar.

Just as he was leaving with bottled water, a group of men burst into the restaurant where Kwon Taekjoo had been sitting. They inspected the spot where he had been, searching for any trace of him. Finding nothing, they approached the owner with urgent questions, showing him photos on their phones. Hesitantly, the owner pointed toward the bazaar.

The men immediately turned and ran into the bazaar. From a distance, it seemed that one of them was a tall white man, nearly two meters, and the other an East Asian man with glasses. Kwon Taekjoo didn't know who they were, but their intent was unsettling. He needed to escape.

The bazaar, over 5 kilometers long, was like a labyrinth. Relying on the mental map he had memorized, he changed directions multiple times as he ran. His pursuers split into two groups, continuing to chase him.

Who were they, really? Police? Why were they so determined to catch him? The more he thought about it, the more confused he became.

Exhausted from running, Kwon Taekjoo ducked into a nearby restroom to catch his breath. The tall white man, who had been hot on his trail, stopped suddenly right outside and then stepped back to peer inside. It was as if he was tracking him with near-supernatural precision. With the danger closing in, Kwon Taekjoo quietly retreated and slipped out through a back door leading to an alley, breaking into a run once again.

The alley was lined with shops selling spices from around the world, the powerful scent nearly numbing his senses. For a moment, his pursuer appeared disoriented at a nearby junction, as if he'd lost a crucial lead. He paced back and forth, unsure of where to go next.

Watching from a distance, Kwon Taekjoo seized the opportunity to escape, moving further away. The exit was now in sight, but suddenly, a booming voice echoed from behind.

"Taekjoo!"

Was it his pursuer's voice? He couldn't be sure. He didn't know who the name was meant for, but the unexpected shout made his heart sink. He was utterly bewildered.

Stumbling in desperation, Kwon Taekjoo raced toward the exit. His heart pounded, his chest tight with anxiety and confusion. Finally, the exit came into view. A large truck was parked just ahead. Without a second thought, he jumped into the passenger seat. The driver, startled by the sudden intrusion, widened his eyes in surprise. Kwon Taekjoo was just as surprised—the driver was the same lecherous man he had seen earlier in the restaurant.

Kwon Taekjoo covered the man's mouth and held a finger to his own lips. The driver, wide-eyed, nodded slowly, raising his hands in surrender. Still, Kwon Taekjoo kept a cautious eye on the window, watching for his pursuers.

"Are they after you?"

The driver asked suddenly. When he didn't get a response, he reached over and started stroking Kwon Taekjoo's thigh. Assuming from the niqab that he was a woman, possibly an Afghan refugee, the driver's attitude became even more presumptuous.

"Need some help?"

With a lascivious look on his face, the driver leaned toward Kwon Taekjoo's chest. His hand, which had been stroking Kwon Taekjoo's thigh, began to move toward his groin. When he felt something unexpected there, he frowned, looking at Kwon Taekjoo in confusion.

Kwon Taekjoo pulled something from beneath the niqab and pressed it against the driver. The driver's eyes widened in fear as he realized that a hard, gun-shaped object was now threatening him.

"Drive."

He ordered firmly. The driver, frozen with terror, hesitated.

"Faster!"

Kwon Taekjoo demanded. Pale with fear, the man started the truck and pulled out toward the immigration checkpoint. Large cargo trucks were lined up, waiting to cross the border. The driver and Kwon Taekjoo merged into the line, the driver following instructions but visibly tense.

"If they catch us, I'll be in trouble too."

"Then make sure you do this right. You never know if other problems might come up, do you?"

Kwon Taekjoo threatened, moving the gun from the driver's groin to his side. As they approached the checkpoint, he shot a silent warning look and crouched down under the seat, the gun aimed at the driver's knee. With the dark niqab, his presence was hard to detect.

"Hey, thanks for your hard work today!"

The driver greeted the soldier at the checkpoint with a smile, handing over his passport and transit permit smoothly. The soldier casually asked, ***"Heading to Kayseri?***" and conducted a quick inspection of the cargo.

"Safe travels."

"Yes, thank you."

"Go on through!"

The soldier called out as he slapped the back of the truck. The driver gulped and slowly drove across the border.

Once they were through, Kwon Taekjoo immediately sat up, pressing the gun to the driver's temple. He tore off the suffocating niqab.

"Yikes! So, why don't we put that dangerous thing down? I'll cooperate, okay?"

The driver stammered, glancing over nervously.

"We'll see. For now, keep driving."

"Where to?"

"You said you were going to Kayseri. Head there first."

With a look of despair, the driver stepped on the gas. Anxious to reach their destination as soon as possible, the truck sped further away from Iran.

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Chapter End Notes

Support the author by purchasing the novel on Ridibooks.

Run Go Run

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•PERSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Zhenya searched the entire bazaar. He checked every possible hiding spot where Kwon Taekjoo might have gone, from trash bins to meat storage areas. Yet, he found no trace of him.

At one point, he picked up Taekjoo's scent, but as he approached the spice stalls, he lost even that faint lead. Had Kwon Taekjoo been there only to move on again? His target was an expert in evasion, and Zhenya knew he wouldn't give up easily. The bazaar was vast and maze-like, packed with people, making it feel like finding a needle in a haystack.

"Ha… ha…"

He gasped, unable to find Taekjoo as he reached the exit. His heart pounded so hard he thought it might burst from his chest. He had never run this much, not even when tracking reindeer or tigers. His gaze was lost as he scanned the faces passing by, his mind racing too fast to recognize anyone.

Meanwhile, travelers, merchants, and trucks loaded with goods steadily crossed the border. Had Taekjoo already made it to Turkey? Or had he found a way to double back, slipping deeper into Iran? He had no certainty either way. He was more lost than ever, unsure of where or how to search.

Through the entire chase, he had called out Taekjoo's name. He shouted, he pleaded, hoping Taekjoo would answer, that he'd stop running. But Taekjoo didn't yield. Had he lost all memory, even of who he was? If he kept running without ever looking back, without any awareness of his identity, then…

Each time Zhenya thought he was close enough to catch him, Taekjoo vanished once more. Every attempt to hold onto him ended with him slipping away like air. A mirage wouldn't be more elusive.

"Taekjoo!" he shouted; his voice filled with despair. The only reply was his own echo, fading into the distance.

They finally arrived in Kayseri after driving 1,200 kilometers without stopping. The journey had taken fifteen grueling hours, winding through a high mountain plateau with an average altitude of 3,200 meters, known as Turkey's Siberia. Covering 21% of the country, the region was rough and arid, with barely any human presence—meaning there were no suitable places to rest. Naturally, Kwon Taekjoo, busy watching the driver, and the driver, focused on survival, had no time to stop.

The truck pulled into an area near a travel lodge. On both sides, cargo trucks and buses were parked, marking the area as a large rest stop. Nearby stood a building serving as both rest area and accommodation, as well as a gas station. Behind it sprawled a bustling market. The driver turned off the engine, set the brake, and announced their arrival. His attitude was noticeably more subdued than before.

"We've arrived, sir."

"Yes. Well done."

Kwon Taekjoo rubbed his sore neck and thanked the driver for his efforts. The driver managed a faint smile.

"So, may I go now…?"

"Not so fast. We need to settle the payment."

"Huh? What do you…?"

Before the driver could finish, Kwon Taekjoo's fist connected with his jaw. The driver groaned, clutching his face in pain. With a look of disdain, Kwon Taekjoo offered him one last piece of advice.

"Don't lay your hands on people like that. It puts me in a foul mood."

"I'm—I'm sorry!"

"Oh, and by the way, you touched my chest too, didn't you?"

The terrified driver raised his arms to shield his face, but Kwon Taekjoo's fist struck his arm with such force that it shook. Had he hit his face, he might have shattered his jaw.

"Ah, please, don't hurt me! It was all my fault, sir," the driver begged, squeezing his eyes shut in desperation.

Kwon Taekjoo replied in a dry tone, ***"Who said I was going to kill you?"***

Then he held out a pill. The driver, still fearful, eyed the pill with distrust.

"What is it, sir?"

"Take it."

"Huh?"

"It won't kill you. Just take it."

"N-no, it's just…"

"Or would you rather I knock you out another way?" Kwon Taekjoo asked with an implied threat. Trembling, the driver took the pill and swallowed it quickly, opening his mouth wide and moving his tongue to show he had swallowed it completely.

Before long, the driver's blinks grew heavy, his eyes glazed over, and he finally slumped forward, fast asleep over the wheel.

The sleeping pill he'd pulled from the first-aid kit turned out to be quite useful. Given how exhausted the driver must have been, Kwon figured one pill should keep him asleep for at least ten hours.

Stepping out of the truck, Kwon Taekjoo walked quickly toward the gas station building. Kayseri, a commercial city in central Turkey just 200 kilometers from the capital Ankara, had long been a key transport hub since Byzantine times. Primarily a center for trading agricultural goods from the Anatolian region Kwon had passed through, it was the perfect place to hide out temporarily or slip away to another city.

His only concern was that someone was pursuing him. The trackers he encountered in Tabriz's Grand Bazaar didn't seem Iranian. Could they be members of the organization he'd once belonged to? Or perhaps he was on some kind of international wanted list? Whatever the reason, Turkey didn't feel like a safe haven.

He first dove into the market, blending in with the crowd. Wandering aimlessly, he tried to clear his thoughts. He'd come to Tehran for some reason and gotten caught up in an unexpected bombing. When he regained consciousness, he remembered nothing. It seemed that his head injury had caused amnesia, a rare but possible occurrence.

Aside from that, he didn't appear to have trouble with calculations, languages, or physical abilities. His quick danger-detection skills, instinctive search for escape routes, and ability to subdue most opponents suggested he wasn't just an office worker or tourist. Since he spoke several languages, he thought he might be a diplomat. But with the Cyrillic tattoo on his thigh and the news that the Russian government was searching for a missing Easterner, he wondered if he was a mercenary who'd worked for them.

He had no certainty either way. It wasn't clear if anyone was searching for him to rescue him or to arrest and punish him. For that reason, he felt he had to keep running until his memories

returned.

Perhaps Kwon Taekjoo was an intelligence agent or a special unit operative working for some country. Memories that surfaced sporadically showed him completing all kinds of seemingly impossible missions. At times, he recalled diving into the depths of the ocean with only an oxygen tank; at others, he fell from terrifying heights toward a tiny target point. He'd scaled cliffs and high-rise buildings with only his body.

He also remembered being pursued, cornered, and captured by military and police forces from various countries. He even vividly recalled escaping through a frozen desert under a hail of gunfire. It was hard to tell which parts of these memories were real and which were illusions. He wasn't even sure if returning to Korea was the right decision.

As he walked, lost in thought, he suddenly collided with someone coming from the opposite direction.

"Ouch! You should watch where you're going."

Behind him, bodyguards approached. Kwon Taekjoo immediately tensed, taking a defensive stance. The man staring at him widened his eyes in surprise.

"Wait, is that you?"

The man seemed to recognize Kwon Taekjoo. But who was he? His empty mind held no information about this person.

"It's been so long! How have you been? What brings you here?"

The man, speaking English with a slight Spanish accent, took Kwon Taekjoo's hands and shook them enthusiastically. He was an attractive Hispanic man with thick hair and eyebrows, deep brown eyes with a warm sunset glow, and smooth skin. His constant smile gave him a friendly air. Had they met before?

Though Kwon Taekjoo stayed silent, the man wasn't deterred. Instead, he frowned with a look of concern.

"Ah, once again, your face is hurt. You really haven't taken care of yourself. Been through a rough job?"

"You… know me?"

Kwon asked cautiously. The man raised his eyebrows, his confused expression soon replaced by a laugh.

"What's this? Have you forgotten me already? It's me, Matías. Matías Pérez."

Showing familiarity, he gave Kwon Taekjoo a light tap on the shoulder. Kwon frowned and asked again, pressing for clarity.

"I asked you. Do you know me?"

Matías lifted his hands in mock surrender, then looked Kwon Taekjoo up and down, puzzled.

“Do you have a twin?” he murmured, almost to himself.

“Didn’t we meet just two months ago? Have you already forgotten?” Matías asked.

“We met? Where?”

“Hmm, was it in Cuba? No, maybe I should say Mexico?”

Kwon Taekjoo had no idea what he was talking about. It was already strange enough that Russia was actively searching for Kwon Taekjoo, and stranger still that a Korean man like him would end up in Iran. Now, Cuba and Mexico were being mentioned. What kind of life had he led?

Matías, silently observing Kwon Taekjoo’s confusion, closed his eyes and gave him a gentle smile.

“It seems it’s been a while. What do you say we go somewhere to talk in peace? We can also tend to those wounds. Maybe then you’ll remember me.”

“…”

Kwon Taekjoo regarded Matías with suspicion. Why did this stranger seem so eager to help him? Even if they had met two months ago, they didn’t seem to be more than acquaintances. Could it really be safe to follow him, despite his casual demeanor?

As he wrestled with his thoughts, his stomach rumbled with hunger. After 15 hours with nothing but water, it made sense. Matías gave him a sympathetic smile.

“Maybe we should grab something to eat first.”

The two entered Matías’s hotel room. His bodyguards, who had accompanied him, stayed outside, keeping watch. Humming to himself, Matías walked over to the minibar, picked up two bottles of the various alcoholic drinks on display, and looked at Kwon Taekjoo.

“Wine or whiskey?”

Without answering, Kwon Taekjoo moved to the window, positioning himself with his back against it so he could scan the outside. After confirming there were no watchers, he started checking the room for security cameras or listening devices. Even on the way to the hotel, he hadn’t let his guard down for a moment. Was that some kind of occupational hazard?

“Let’s go with both.”

Matías shrugged, placing both the wine and whiskey on the table. Kwon Taekjoo inspected the two bathrooms as well before returning to the main room. Still, he didn’t sit on the couch right away.

Trying to ease the tension, Matías took a gun from his pocket. He set it on the table with the handle facing the middle, making it accessible to either of them. Kwon Taekjoo followed suit, placing his Glock down beside it before taking a seat across from him. To the untrained eye, his gun might look like an old model with poor accuracy.

“How are you even still alive with that junk?” Matías teased.

“It might be junk to some, but not to everyone.”

Despite Matías’s joke, Kwon Taekjoo didn’t budge. Instead, he stretched out his legs, crossed his arms, and kept his head held high as he stared at Matías. Matías grinned slyly as he poured the whiskey.

“I noticed it last time, but, you know, you’ve got an enormous amount of confidence.”

“Takes a lot of confidence to bring down someone like you.”

“That line sounded a bit… suggestive, don’t you think?”

Matías said with a playful glint in his eye. But Kwon Taekjoo didn’t even crack a smile. Matías wondered how he could make this stone-cold expression finally break.

With a smirk, Matías poured a drink and handed it to Kwon Taekjoo.

“Come on, you must be thirsty. Have a sip.”

“…”

“Wow, you’re really suspicious, huh? Alright, I’ll start.”

Matías emptied his whiskey glass and then shook both empty glasses in his hands. Kwon Taekjoo poured his own drink, taking a sip while still eyeing Matías from head to toe. He was sizing him up, noting the flawlessly tailored suit, the slightly excessive accessories, and his laid-back manner. Had he been in an environment like this before? Even without his memories, his tastes and principles wouldn’t just change overnight.

“Still being chased?”

Matías asked meaningfully after a moment of silence. Kwon Taekjoo tilted his head, puzzled.

“Again?”

“Yeah. The first time we met, you were being chased, too.”

“By who?”

“Well, broadly speaking, the Cuban government.”

Kwon Taekjoo gave a dry laugh. Now he was apparently wanted in Cuba, on top of Russia and Iran? Had he actually been some kind of international terrorist? Could he really be so far

removed from extremist groups like ISIS? And if he went back to Korea, was there even a place waiting for him? His mind was swirling with questions.

Matías observed Kwon Taekjoo closely. From their first encounter in the marketplace, he had sensed something was off, and now he was certain something had changed. Still, he kept his face neutral, continuing the conversation casually, as he asked about Zhenya.

“By the way, what brings you here? I don’t see ‘Psych’ around. Didn’t he come with you this time?”

“Psych” was a Russian word meaning “crazy.” From the way they spoke, it seemed Matías and Kwon Taekjoo both knew this person, but Kwon Taekjoo had no idea who he was talking about.

“Who’s that?”

“What? Did you eat something strange?”

“Who is he?”

“Do you seriously not know? We met through Psych. Or, to be exact, you followed my deal with Psych.”

“Was I friends with this guy?”

“I have no idea. I don’t know what your motives were in dealing with Psych.”

Matías made a face, tracing an invisible line in the air. Overwhelmed by this sudden influx of information, Kwon Taekjoo tried to remember ‘Psych.’

“Psych… Psych…”

For some reason, his heart pounded faster. It felt like he had forgotten something massively important. Suddenly, it was as if all the blood in his body had turned cold.

“There’s one thing you need to keep in mind—Psych Bogdanov.”

“Psych Bogdanov?”

“In Russia, he’s like a ‘nuclear’ guy. So, stay out of his way. If you ever cross paths with him, don’t try to take him on.”

Soon, a memory managed to break through the thick wall of his mind. Although he couldn't remember who had warned him about "Psych" or the context in which he’d received the warning, the feeling of that moment was vivid. His heart began to pound, and his fingers felt strangely numb.

"That person is, strictly speaking, a government official. He’s an expert in the arms industry. He's quite skilled, and in the underworld of arms dealing, there isn’t anyone who doesn’t know him."

Clearly, he'd been warned to stay away from "Psych." Yet he couldn't understand why he had been involved with him in the first place.

"Ugh..."

Once again, the pressure in his head mounted. He felt a throbbing pain and a warmth emanating from the wound on his head.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Matías reached out a hand. Despite the nausea overwhelming him, he brushed Matías's hand away. Matías sighed, shaking his reddened hand before sitting back slowly, palms open as if to show he meant no harm. Then he pulled out a handkerchief, wrapped a few ice cubes in it, and offered it to Kwon Taekjoo.

Kwon Taekjoo accepted the ice reluctantly, pressing it against the throbbing wound on his head. He leaned back on the sofa, taking deep breaths as the discomfort in his throat began to ease. Matías watched him in surprise and, in a gentle tone, asked carefully:

"What happened?"

Kwon Taekjoo didn't respond. Matías, not giving up, asked again in a tone that could dissolve any remaining suspicion:

"Where did you come from?"

"When I came to, I was in Tehran."

Kwon Taekjoo replied, his tone less certain. He knew Matías was aware of the recent terrorist attack in Tehran. The news had shaken the region, raising tensions in Turkey and freezing international politics just before a crucial summit between Iran, Russia, and Turkey.

But Kwon Taekjoo had been on the scene. What had happened to him? Questions continued to swarm in Matías's mind.

"Don't you know why you were there?"

Kwon Taekjoo nodded silently. Seeing his wounds and knowing he had been at the site of the attack gave Matías reasons to speculate: Was he involved in the attack, or had he just been in the wrong place at the wrong time?

As Matías weighed these possibilities, Kwon Taekjoo began to speak, his gaze growing uneasy and hesitant, as if he were about to reveal something important.

"Do you know anything about 'Anastasia'?"

Matías raised an eyebrow at the mention of "Anastasia" and nodded slowly, though his expression remained unreadable.

"Anastasia? Are you talking about a person or something else?"

Kwon Taekjoo nodded affirmatively, waiting for Matías to clarify. Matías, unsure if the question referred to a person or another matter, began rubbing his brow, looking puzzled.

"I'm not sure if you're referring to a person or something else."

Matías's comment seemed more like a personal reflection than a direct answer. Kwon Taekjoo looked uncomfortable, as though he had let slip something he would have preferred to keep hidden. After a moment of thought, Matías leaned forward, a resolute expression on his face, and clapped his hands lightly as if he'd made up his mind on how to proceed.

"Well, I don't know exactly what's going on either, but first things first—let's take care of your injuries. And while we're at it, we can see if there's an issue with your memory. Sound good? Let's get you to the hospital for a check-up. Then I can figure out how to help you."

"Help me? Why you?"

"Even though we're not close, I can't ignore this. Leaving someone in trouble is for the heartless."

Matías gave an exasperated look and, without further delay, instructed his assistant to arrange a hospital appointment. After hanging up, he tapped his wrist and clicked his tongue, clearly impatient.

"Room service is taking forever. Why don't you take a shower first?"

"No need."

"Come on, don't be like that. You look like you could use the rest. A shower will make you feel better."

Matías coaxed, his tone persuasive, with a gentle charm that made the suggestion almost irresistible. After a moment's hesitation, Kwon Taekjoo reached over to the table, picked up Matías's pistol, held it in clear view, then tucked it into his belt and headed to the bathroom. As soon as he closed the door, he locked it firmly.

Matías shook his head with a smile. When the sound of the shower started, he picked up a glass of wine and began swirling it slowly. The dark red liquid moved smoothly along the elegant edge of the glass.

Now that he thought about it, what was his name? He'd only ever referred to the man as Psych's companion, never recalling a proper introduction to Kwon Taekjoo. All he knew was that he was Korean and seemed to mean a great deal to Psych.

Psych, who had ignored all of Matías's previous requests for a meeting, had suddenly reached out. He'd said that in exchange for ensuring someone's safety out of Cuba, he'd offer any product Matías wanted. It wasn't a difficult request for Matías, so he accepted without hesitation. But he'd still been curious about who Psych wanted to rescue. At the time, Matías

imagined it might be a spy as alluring as Mata Hari. Instead, Psych had brought him a somber-looking Asian man.

And now, “Psych’s man” had reappeared in front of Matías, looking almost exactly as he had when he’d escaped from Cuba. For some reason, Psych wasn’t with him, and the man seemed to remember neither Psych nor who he himself was.

What did Psych call him?

"Ahhh, ahhh, Zhe-Zhenya, ahhh! Ahhh, ahhh!"

"Ahhh, uh, Taekjoo, uh, Taekjoo..."

"Ahhh, ahhh, uh, stop that... ahhh, Zhenya...!"

"Ahhh, ahhh, uh, Taekjoo, Taek—...!"

Suddenly, he recalled the sexual encounters between Psych and Kwon Taekjoo. Despite knowing there were security cameras all over the yacht and the mansion, the two continued their trysts without restraint. Their rounds were so intense and uninhibited that even Matías, who thought he’d seen it all, was left stunned.

"...Taekjoo?"

Yes, he was sure that was the name. Kwon Taekjoo also often called Psych by the nickname Zhenya. Although he didn’t know much about their connection, it seemed more than a partnership. There was an intimacy there that went beyond mere comradeship. That Psych’s lover was a man didn’t surprise him; in this world, eccentric tastes were common.

At that time, Kwon Taekjoo hadn’t been able to relax as he did now. He constantly eyed the CCTV cameras with a suspicious look.

"Hey, look at that. Isn’t that a camera?"

"...Quite a preference."

Zhenya just glanced at the CCTV cameras that worried Kwon Taekjoo and simply made a dismissive gesture. Then Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taekjoo's chin to make him look at him again. Kwon Taekjoo, who was having a hard time concentrating on what they were doing and kept averting his eyes to the camera, finally shifted his position so that his body was on top of Zhenya's. He lifted himself up with his knees, completely baring his crotch to the camera on the ceiling as he did so. Zhenya's cock, which was rubbing against Kwon Taekjoo's perineum, was also exposed at the same time.

“Hey, wait, they're recording!”

“If they want to spy, let them take a good look.”

Zhenya, grinning mischievously, vigorously rammed his cock into Kwon Taekjoo's hole. Then, Kwon Taekjoo's waist lifted slightly and his head tilted back, brushing against

Zhenya's shoulder. Zhenya enjoyed the tight sensation, rubbing his ear against Kwon Taekjoo's. He then began to move slowly, placing kisses on Kwon Taekjoo's ear and cheek.

With the deep, slow fucking, Kwon Taekjoo's body shuddered slightly. Zhenya, from time to time, looked directly at the camera on the ceiling as he thrusted upward, showing off the deed. Zhenya's firmly impaled cock was clearly moving under the skin of Kwon Taekjoo's abdomen. With each heavy movement that hit the inner walls, Kwon Taekjoo's abdominal muscles swelled and contracted, repeating the movement intensely. This allowed Zhenya's penetration and intensity to be clearly perceived.

Kwon Taekjoo, who seemed not to have an inch to spare, moaned lustily on top of Zhenya as he fell apart. Each time his insides were pierced, he gripped Zhenya's thighs tightly, and when he couldn't take it any longer, he grabbed Zhenya's neck and began kissing him passionately. Their tongues entangled and pulled apart, greedily meeting again.

They kissed aggressively, as if trying to steal each other's breath. It was a passionate encounter, almost like a body fight. In spite of that, the movement of Zhenya's hips that kept on penetrating did not diminish, but became more and more intense.

“Ah, ah... Taekjoo.”

“Ahh... uhh...”

They both surrendered to moans of pleasure, rubbing their chins and foreheads together. It was an achingly tender gesture, as if they were trying to cope with the overwhelming pleasure they were giving each other. Matías was taken aback—not only by how vulnerable this "Psych" could be, but also by himself, having silently observed every detail of their intimate encounter.

Maybe he could understand it, just a little. Seeing Kwon Taekjoo’s usually severe, sharp features melt like ripe fruit was, in its way, provocative. Who would have imagined that Kwon Taekjoo could reveal such a side?

Did Psych know what Kwon Taekjoo was up to right now? Or that he’d completely forgotten about Psych?

An unexpected wild card had fallen into his hands. This time, what would Psych offer him? A satisfied smile spread across Matías's face.

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Chapter End Notes

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So Close Yet So Far

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•PERSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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"I'll be right back. Don’t fight."

The voice delivering the warning was low and deep. When Kwon Taekjoo looked up, he saw the blurry figure of a man watching him. He couldn’t see his face clearly. Without responding, he only blinked, and the man reached out to stroke his cheek. The touch was firm yet warm. The weight of his hand on his head and the way his voice seemed to resonate in the air all felt so familiar. And he missed him. The man who always lifted him onto his shoulders to bring him closer to the sky. The one who taught him that learning to ride a bike meant falling down a few times. The one who helped him understand how exhausting it was to carry the ball alone to the opponent’s basket. Before long, the blurry silhouette took on a clear shape. It was his father.

"Can’t you stay home and play with me today? It’s a holiday!"

"When I finish work, we’ll play as much as you want. Okay, my son?"

"...That’s a lie. You’re always busy, Dad. You hardly come home."

His father always made promises he couldn’t keep, and as a child, Taekjoo couldn’t hide his disappointment and would get sulky. Each time that happened, his father would kneel down to his level to console his wounded little heart.

"Taekjoo, what did I say it is that Dad does?"

"Protect the country."

"That’s right. If Dad protects the country, our family will be safe, and you can play freely without any worries."

"Why does only Dad have to protect the country? Why only you?"

"Hmm… All adults protect the country, just in different ways. It’s a duty we all take on as citizens of a nation."

For young Kwon Taekjoo, these words were difficult and complicated to understand. His father would tell him he’d understand everything when he grew up, never attempting to explain it too deeply. At that moment, someone who had been watching from behind stepped forward and gently pulled him by the shoulder.

"Don’t worry, Dad. I’ll explain it to him."

A calm and gentle voice came from just a bit above him. When he turned slightly, the blurred shadow started to take a clear shape. A boy with a kind look smiled at Kwon Taekjoo. Sometimes he’d say, "Let’s play, little brother."

"Take good care of Mom too. I’m counting on you, my sons."

At his father’s request, a family photo appeared in a dark corner. His father in uniform, his mother beaming with a bright smile, and the brothers, each resembling one of their parents. Then, the inside of their family home filled with vibrant colors before his eyes.

The last morning with his father was no different from any other. As usual, his father left him with several words of advice and walked out the door, never to return. Slowly, his father's presence faded from the family photo, and his mother’s bright expression vanished along with it.

From that point on, he felt his brother had changed. Perhaps he thought it was now up to him to protect the family in their father’s place. His brother began speaking less and spent more time reflecting alone. He also started keeping things from their mother more frequently.

When his brother entered the military academy, it was the first time he had ever disobeyed their mother, and she was ill for days. The night before he left for his first deployment, freshly graduated as an officer, she stayed awake with worry.

His brother always comforted their mother with kindness, never showing any signs of weariness or impatience. Maybe he believed it was his duty to bear the pain of having gone against their mother’s only wish.

“This time, when I set sail, I won’t be able to come back for two months. Look after Mom for me.”

Every time he departed, his brother would send Taekjoo those words. On the day he died in service, he did the same.

He was awarded a posthumous medal of honor in front of his portrait. The media, in telling the story of a family that had received the medal of honor across three generations since their

grandfather, spoke endlessly of noble, righteous sacrifice. But for those left behind, neither the promotions, nor the medals, nor the world's praise provided any comfort.

Now, in the family photo on the wall, only his mother's somber face and Kwon Taekjoo's expressionless one remained. The house had grown so silent, it felt desolate.

He opened his eyes slowly. An unfamiliar ceiling filled his vision. Had it been a dream? No, it was a part of the past Kwon Taekjoo had lived through. He lay there for a moment, memories of his childhood beginning to resurface. His father, frequently absent from home, his death in service, his brother following in their father's footsteps as a soldier, and the unfortunate repetition of family tragedy. He even remembered his mother embracing him at his brother's funeral, pleading that he was now all she had left.

But that was as far as his memory went. And even then, those memories were incomplete. What kind of life had Kwon Taekjoo lived after that?

"Damn it… This is unbearable."

Maybe it was the sheer flood of memories coming back all at once, but the mental strain triggered an intense headache, along with a strong nausea churning his stomach.

Clutching his head with both arms, he waited for the piercing pain to subside. The agony made his legs slide and kick over the sheets. The sharp, relentless pain felt as though his nerves were being devoured, driving him to hurl the pillow in a fit of frustration. It felt like his brain was going to be crushed.

Once the headache started, it typically lasted for several minutes. As it finally eased, he stumbled out of bed, desperate for fresh air.

He flung open the window. Outside, he saw the town's landscape unfold, with jagged, rocky formations stretching into the distance. Colorful hot air balloons added a unique touch to the scene.

"What is this place?"

"Göreme. It's a landscape formed from layers of sediment left after volcanic eruptions, shaped over time by rain and underground water. People eventually built a village here, completing the scene. It's a joint work of nature and humanity. Quite impressive, isn't it?"

"So, what's going on? You said you were busy. Busy doing what?"

"Yep, busy. I am here for business, after all. Tourists don't usually raise suspicion, you know?"

"You're admitting to doing suspicious things, then."

"Look at my face and wealth, my friend. They've already surpassed legal status, haven't they?"

Matías, who was explaining why he'd come here, joked as he winked. Kwon Taekjoo instinctively clenched his fists.

"...You said you'd help me. Are you serious?"

"Or are you going to hit me with those fists?"

"As you can see, I'm barely holding back. Still, you're my only lifeline right now, so I think I'll let you live."

"How considerate of you. Don't worry, Taekjoo. Once I finish what I need to do here, I'll figure out a way to get you back to Korea. Just rest and wait. Let me know if you need anything."

In truth, Matías treated Kwon Taekjoo with more than generosity. He provided him with a place to stay, high-quality clothes, food and drink in abundance, and even a decent pistol.

The more generous he was, the more doubts crept in. Who exactly was Matías to have so much money, and how had Kwon Taekjoo ended up involved with him? He openly admitted it wasn't a legal business, so it was impossible to know what kind of world he came from. Just seeing the number of guards constantly surrounding Matías, it was clear how many enemies he had. There was nothing to gain from associating with someone like him, but in this moment, Taekjoo was desperate, needing to cling to anything—even a fraying lifeline.

He rubbed the back of his head and sipped from a bottle of mineral water. Even the smallest movement made the wound on his head throb.

The day after meeting Matías, he went straight to a local hospital for an examination. The doctor ran several tests, asked Taekjoo numerous questions, and finally told him he seemed to have lost his memory due to cranial trauma. The doctor even showed him an MRI image where his hippocampus, the brain's memory center, appeared shrunken. They said his memories would likely return gradually, but that some might be lost permanently.

Most memories are the result of life experiences and accumulated moments. Some memories play a key role in survival. For someone like Kwon Taekjoo, who always seemed to be on the run, memory-based information was even more valuable.

Maybe that was why he felt uneasy, even though he'd been told he only needed to wait. Matías hadn't done anything particularly harmful to him, and for now, he only needed to rest under his protection, but the feeling of anxiety lingered. It was as if he were forgetting something vital. What could that be?

As he continued trying to find an answer, he heard a knock on the door. He turned his head to look at the closed door, but didn't respond.

Despite that, someone unlocked the door from outside. Moments later, Matías strolled in as if he owned the place, just as a water bottle went flying at his head. Matías feigned pain, groaning, **"Ouch!"**

“Oh, you were awake? Then why didn’t you answer?”

“You’re lucky I only had this bottle on hand. Why do you just walk in uninvited?”

Matías, without a hint of shame, responded cheekily.

“When you didn’t get up even though the sun’s been up for hours, I came to check on you. How was I supposed to know if your condition worsened overnight? Did you forget what the doctor said? It’s a miracle you’re not passing out.”

“Were you secretly hoping I would?”

“Of course not. Even for me, dealing with a corpse is a hassle. But did you really just wake up? You seem to sleep more than I expected.”

“Thanks to you, I couldn’t sleep well.”

He shot Matías a look of deep contempt. Matías, picking up on it, smirked mischievously.

“Oh, did you hear me?”

“Didn’t you make sure I would?”

He hadn’t expected five-star comfort or amenities in a place like this, but he did expect some soundproofing. All night long, the sounds of Matías having sex with his partners drifted through the walls, making it impossible for Taekjoo to rest.

Even after Taekjoo directly confronted him, Matías smiled without a hint of remorse.

“If I’d known, I’d have invited you to join.”

“Sorry, I don’t do sharing.”

“Oh, really? Well, it’s not like I was eager to share anyway.”

Kwon Taekjoo frowned. **“What the hell are you even saying?”** Had he forgotten that he’d also been with a man? Or maybe his tastes were more particular than they seemed. Either way, for Matías, both options were amusing to observe.

“I’m thinking of having lunch soon. Care to join me?” Matías asked.

“Before that, I’d like to use a phone.”

“A phone? For what?”

“To call my mother.”

Matías looked taken aback by the unexpected answer. Taekjoo scratched the back of his neck, looking a bit embarrassed.

“Your mother? The woman who gave birth to you?”

“What, did you think I had another mother?”

“No, it’s not that... Have you remembered more?”

“A little. She must be really worried by now. You must have a phone line that’s hard to trace, right?”

Matías nodded casually and pulled a phone from his jacket, handing it over. Seeing Taekjoo hesitate, he gestured for him to take it.

“What, you’re giving it to me just like that?”

“Or would you like me to take it back?”

“And you?”

“Do you think I only have one phone?”

As always, something about Matías didn’t sit right with him. With a look of reluctance, Taekjoo snatched the phone. Trying to unlock it, he realized it required fingerprint and iris recognition. Sighing in frustration, he handed it back. Matías moved in close, took Taekjoo’s hand to place his finger on the reader, and then scanned his own iris to unlock it. That excessive familiarity was, as always, deeply annoying.

Kwon Taekjoo shook off Matías’s hand as if swatting away a bug and motioned for him to leave the room. Matías simply said, **“I’ll be waiting in the dining room,”** and left without further questions. Once the door clicked shut and Taekjoo was sure Matías was out of earshot, he began dialing. Carefully, he keyed in the number he remembered for his mother and pressed the call button.

Soon, the familiar ringtone echoed in his ears. It wasn’t long before he heard his mother’s voice on the other end, slightly hesitant as she answered the unknown number.

“…Hello?”

“Mom, it’s me.”

“Taekjoo? Oh, thank God! Thank you, thank you! But what happened? I’ve gone over two weeks without a word from you. Do you know how worried I’ve been? If I didn’t hear from you today or tomorrow, I was planning to head back to Korea.”

Relief flooded her voice, but it quickly turned into gentle scolding. Over two weeks had passed since she last heard from him, so her concern was only natural. But what did she mean by “heading back to Korea”? Did that mean she wasn’t currently there?

“A lot has happened.”

“I see. Jongwoo told me a bit. He said there was an attack in Iran, and you were taken to Russia with the ambassador. Is it all resolved now?”

Jongwoo? The name didn't ring a bell. The memories Taekjoo had regained so far were mostly from before university, so perhaps this was someone he met later. If his mother was speaking with this person directly, they must have been quite close to him.

But why was she so casual about the idea of him being taken to Russia with an "ambassador"? Who was this ambassador she was referring to?

And if Taekjoo had gone to Russia with this ambassador over two weeks ago, why had he been found alone in Iran? Was this ambassador part of an official Russian delegation? Was Taekjoo openly working for them? Could that be why he was listed on the official Russian rescue list? A flurry of doubts and speculations crowded his mind.

After a long pause, his mother's voice broke through his thoughts. "Taekjoo?"

"Ah, yes. There are still a few loose ends to tie up, but nothing you need to worry about. Are you okay, Mom? You're not having any health issues, are you?"

Had he always worked under this person? But why would his boss be contacting his mother directly? Could the ambassador possibly be a woman? Pushing aside his confusion, Taekjoo tried to maintain a calm tone.

"It's nothing too serious. Still, they'll be increasing monitoring on communications for a while to prevent any leaks of sensitive information, so I might not be able to contact you again soon. I just wanted to let you know so you wouldn't worry."

"I understand. But really, it's not dangerous, is it?"

"Of course not. Why would it be dangerous? Besides, I'm not even in Iran anymore."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Please do. Anyway, I'd better hang up now."

Taekjoo hurried to end the call, afraid he might slip up if it went on any longer. Just as he was about to say goodbye, his mother called out again, her tone calmer now. "Taekjoo."

"Yes?"

"If it ever gets too hard to bear, no matter what duty or conviction you feel, leave it all behind and come back to me. It wouldn't be cowardly at all."

"Why are you saying that all of a sudden?"

"It's just… a mother's worry. You need to remember this: there's nothing in this world more important than your life. I don't care if you accomplish nothing. It's okay. You don't need to achieve anything great. So, never push yourself too far."

Her words made Taekjoo think of his father and brother, both of whom had passed on before him. He couldn't help but wonder how he had ended up ignoring his mother's only wish and putting himself in such a dangerous situation.

“I know. Mom, take care of your health.”

“I will. And give my regards to the ambassador as well.”

“I will. Goodbye.”

He hung up and began sifting through the new information he’d just gathered. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t recall anyone named "Jongwoo." It seemed unlikely they’d met around the time he started university.

Perhaps someone he knew through work? If his mother was on such familiar terms with them, it must have been more than just a brief acquaintance.

Then there was the other mystery figure.

“The Russian ambassador…”

Could it be that Taekjoo had been working on a diplomatic mission? Was that why he spoke multiple languages? Could it have any connection to the tattoo on the inside of his thigh?

He decided to try accessing the internet using the phone. If the ambassador held such a high-ranking position, there was a good chance he could find their photo with a quick search. Perhaps seeing their face would jog some memories.

However, he was unable to connect. He moved around the room, thinking it might be a signal issue, but nothing worked. It seemed Matías had restricted internet access. Despite claiming to be conducting business, Matías had clearly taken steps to prevent any potential breaches. With no other choice, Taekjoo erased the phone’s usage history.

He tossed the phone onto the bed and settled by the windowsill. His mind buzzed with unanswered questions. If he truly had been assisting a Russian ambassador, why had he entered Iran illegally? What was the significance of the tattoo on his thigh? And who was "Jongwoo"?

Up until his university years, his life had been relatively ordinary. When had it veered so drastically off course? Was there a specific event or reason behind it?

None of these questions had answers. Frustrated, he let his head fall back against the glass of the window. There was something important he was still missing—something critical.

Yoon Jongwoo was at a hotel in Tabriz, poring over CCTV footage from various angles and resolutions. He had meticulously reviewed every person who had passed through the area in recent days, but none resembled Kwon Taekjoo.

His eyes burned from staring at the screen for so long without proper rest. Even blinking felt like rubbing sandpaper against his eyelids. As usual, he reached for his eye drops, but the bottle was empty. Not a single drop came out.

Stretching his neck and shoulders for a brief reprieve, he glanced around the empty room. It was a quiet, solitary space. Since Zhenya had lost track of Kwon Taekjoo at the Grand Bazaar, he'd become even more withdrawn. He barely stopped by the hotel, only returning late at night to check if Jongwoo had found any leads before heading out again. He never said where he was going or when he'd return.

It felt as though Zhenya, already a man of few words, had grown even more reticent.

"Ugh..."

Jongwoo sighed, exhausted by the lack of progress.

According to Zhenya, it seemed that Kwon Taekjoo had suffered amnesia from a head injury. Jongwoo had done his research and knew that memory loss could gradually improve with time, though there were cases where it became permanent. He hoped desperately that Taekjoo would fall into the former category, but the uncertainty gnawed at him.

Of course, the one most confused in all of this had to be Kwon Taekjoo himself. Jongwoo wasn't sure how much Taekjoo remembered, but the fact that he wasn't responding to his calls suggested that he had lost at least a decade of memories.

If Taekjoo had even forgotten that he'd joined the National Intelligence Service, he must have been utterly disoriented. To wake up in Iran, accused of terrorism, imprisoned without warning, and then escape after numerous struggles without knowing where to go—it was a situation the Kwon Taekjoo Jongwoo knew would never have imagined. The man now wasn't the same Taekjoo he remembered, making it nearly impossible to predict where he might be or what he might be doing.

"Sunbae… where are you, really?" Jongwoo murmured, burying his face in his hands.

The fact that Taekjoo had reached Tabriz meant he was likely trying to cross into Turkey. Since Zhenya hadn't reported anything new, it seemed Taekjoo hadn't been caught by border patrol yet. Normally, Taekjoo would have relied on disguises or brute force to sneak through.

But in his current state, he probably didn't have the weapons or resources needed for a convincing disguise. Or… did he?

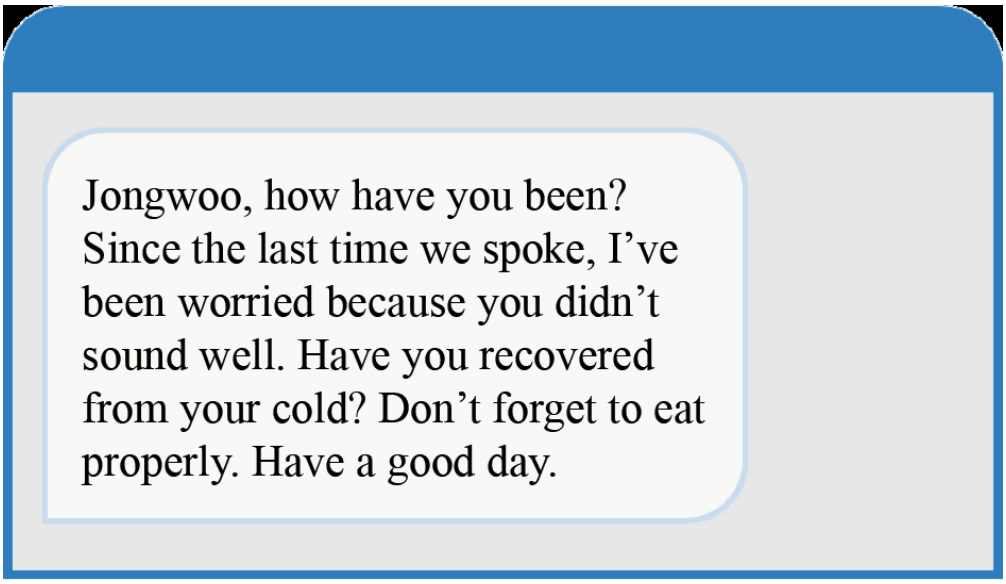
Jongwoo redirected his attention to the screen, scanning the CCTV footage again. Among the crowd were many Muslim women. In Iran, most wore hijabs or chadors, but in this border region, more conservative attire like burqas was common, fully covering the wearer from head to toe.

On a hunch, Jongwoo removed all the filters he had set to search for Taekjoo. Instead, he applied parameters matching his height and gait and resumed his analysis.

Just then, his phone buzzed, startling him from his concentration. It was a message notification. For a fleeting moment, he thought it might be Taekjoo, and he quickly grabbed the phone, only to feel a pang of disappointment.

It wasn’t the message he’d been hoping for.

It was a text from Taekjoo’s mother:


Jongwoo, how have you been? Since the last time we spoke, I’ve been worried because you didn’t sound well. Have you recovered from your cold? Don’t forget to eat properly. Have a good day.

Kwon Taekjoo often complained that his mother would do anything for Zhenya, whom she saw as his superior. Yet in truth, she also took great care of Yoon Jongwoo, her son's subordinate. She welcomed him warmly every time he visited, always asked after his well-being first, and made sure to prepare enough food for both of them.

Because of this, every time Jongwoo saw her, he felt a heavy burden in his heart. He had been complicit in helping Kwon Taekjoo keep the truth from her. Now, with Taekjoo missing, it fell on him to carry on the deception.

After hesitating for a moment, Jongwoo pressed the call button. The phone barely rang twice before Taekjoo’s mother answered.

“Is that you, Jongwoo?”

“Yes, it’s me. How have you been?”

“Oh, I’m fine. Nothing new here. And you? Have you recovered from that fever you had last time?”

“Yes, I think it was just exhaustion. I’m fine now.”

“Really? You still sound a bit weak. If I were in Korea, I’d cook you something good to eat… such a shame!”

“Please, save the invitation for later. I promise I’m taking care of myself.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Are you busy with the same kind of work as Taekjoo? You know, he called me recently. He could only talk for a moment, but he said he’d be unreachable for a while.”

“What? He called you?”

The news caught him off guard, and he shot upright, hitting his knee against the edge of the table. Gripping the phone tightly, he tried to contain his mix of pain and shock.

“So… so he spoke to you? You actually heard from him?”

“Yes. Haven’t you heard from him?”

“No, not yet... When exactly did he call you?”

His urgency was clear, and it must have startled Taekjoo’s mother, who responded in a slightly puzzled tone.

“He called early in the morning, around 1 a.m. our time. He said he was fine and told me not to worry. He mentioned that he still had a lot to sort out in Russia and that the situation was delicate, so he wouldn’t be able to stay in touch often. We didn’t talk for long. Why do you ask?”

If Taekjoo had contacted his mother, it meant he at least remembered his family history—that his father and brother had died in the line of duty, leaving only him and his mother, which explained why she worried so much about his safety.

“It’s just that I haven’t been able to reach him on his usual number. Do you remember what number he called from?”

“Hmm… I think it said ‘restricted number’ or something like that. Is it urgent?”

“Not exactly, I just needed to ask him something.”

“Oh, I see. Well, maybe if you wait, he’ll call you too, don’t you think?”

“…I suppose so. If he calls again, could you ask him to contact me? He might not remember my number, so perhaps you could give it to him as well.”

“Of course, I’ll do that.”

“Thank you. Take care, and see you soon.”

“Yes, take care of yourself too, Jongwoo. See you back in Korea.”

“Yeah.” He ended the call just as the door to the room burst open. The unexpected entrance startled him, and he let out a small yelp.

Zhenya stood in the doorway, his frown so severe it looked as though he was ready to bury someone right then and there. Clearly, his search had turned up empty again. Jongwoo, who would normally stay silent in such moments, hurried over to him.

“Mr. Yevgeny! I have good news! I just spoke with Sunbae’s mother, and she said he contacted her to let her know he’s okay.”

“Taekjoo?”

“Yes! The call came from a restricted number, but if he went to the trouble of calling to say he’s fine, doesn’t that mean he’s regained some of his memories?”

“Then, where is Taekjoo now?”

“Uh, his mother doesn’t know. A while ago, to keep her from worrying, I told her Sunbae was in Russia on official business with you. And during the call, he didn’t say anything unusual, so he probably lied, letting her believe he’s still in Russia.”

This suggested that Kwon Taekjoo had either regained some memories about his family or never lost them. If he also remembered his work with the National Intelligence Service, he might have reached out to Jongwoo. But so far, there had been no contact. Should he wait longer? Could Taekjoo find him on his own?

Jongwoo shook his head. The uncertainty was driving him mad; he couldn’t stand not knowing what Taekjoo was doing. He needed to find him and make sure he was safe.

“Can we trace that call?”

“I’ll try.”

Yoon Jongwoo immediately got to work. He hacked into the phone of Taekjoo’s mother to trace recent calls. It was something he had done countless times during his time at the NIS, so it was second nature to him.

When the results came in, his expression fell.

“Ah, it looks like it was a disposable phone.”

“And the call’s origin?”

“It shows multiple locations. The phone seems to have a system in place to block tracking. What kind of phone could he be using?”

Scratching his head, Jongwoo muttered, **“Wait a second,”** and pulled out a USB drive. He plugged it into his laptop and launched a specific program.

Recently, international criminal organizations had begun using sophisticated security measures, prompting investigative agencies to develop counter-programs. Jongwoo used one of these to remove interference signals, narrowing the error margin in the trace.

“Hmm… It’s highly likely he’s in Turkey, somewhere south of Ankara.”

So he really had crossed into Turkey. The problem was that over half a day had passed since Taekjoo had called his mother. Even if they pursued him immediately, there was no guarantee he was still in Ankara. Searching an entire city that vast was out of the question.

As Jongwoo delved deeper into his thoughts, he let out a quiet gasp, catching Yevgeny's attention.

"One more thing. I figured out how Sunbae managed to leave Tabriz without being caught on CCTV. Look at this."

Jongwoo turned his laptop toward Yevgeny and adjusted the parameters he had tweaked before speaking to Taekjoo's mother. When he hit enter, the silhouette of a person on the CCTV footage turned green. All the videos containing that silhouette began to play one after another.

It appeared the person was wearing something that covered their body entirely—likely a niqab.

"Is that… Taekjoo?"

"I can't say for sure, but so far, this person matches Sunbae the closest. If he's been wearing a niqab the whole time, it would explain why we couldn't find or recognize him in the footage."

"Where did that person go?"

Instead of answering, Jongwoo zoomed in on the final video. A cargo truck was parked near the bazaar's exit. Soon, the person in the niqab emerged from the bazaar and quickly climbed into the truck's passenger seat. It was only a moment, but the way they moved—their running and jumping—felt eerily familiar. It had to be Kwon Taekjoo.

"Here, this is the truck. Getting into this truck was the last thing he did."

Jongwoo paused the video and pointed at the truck's license plate. Although the numbers were hard to make out in the footage, they could partially identify the vehicle's model and some digits of the plate by comparing it to other videos.

Yevgeny snapped a picture of the truck and sent it off quickly before making a call. The moment someone picked up, he began giving orders.

"It's me. Check the driver of the truck I just sent you and its destination. Prep the private jet. Yes, right now."

Yoon Jongwoo quietly began packing up. He placed his laptop and gear into his bag, silently hoping this time, they would finally reunite with Kwon Taekjoo.

While resting in his room, the noise outside suddenly grew louder. He approached the window and looked down. Word had it that the entire hotel had been rented out for a business transaction, and now unfamiliar cars were arriving in a steady line. All of them were luxury sedans.

Soon, several burly men in suits emerged from the vehicles. Some stayed near the cars while others positioned themselves at the building's entrance, keeping watch. They all wore dark

sunglasses and carried rifles. The situation reeked of danger.

Only a few entered the hotel. Leading the group was a middle-aged man, flanked by what seemed to be his assistants or bodyguards.

Kwon Taekjoo stepped away from the window and moved toward the door, pressing his ear against it to focus on the noises beyond. It wasn't long before he heard the group walking down the hallway. The hotel, like many in the Anatolia region, was small and lacked an elevator, so they seemed to be heading up the stairs to the rooftop.

They looked like underworld figures. Could these be the guests Matías had mentioned?

He recalled the conversation over a late breakfast when Matías, dressed to the nines, had strolled into the dining room. Without asking, Matías had taken Taekjoo's juice and gulped it down, all while making casual remarks about whether the food was to his liking or if he still needed another hospital visit.

"How long are you planning to stay here?"

"I'm leaving this afternoon. A client's coming soon, and I'll head out once the deal's done."

Taekjoo set down his fork and crossed his arms. Now that the topic had been brought up, he decided to ask directly.

"What kind of person are you, exactly?"

"Huh? I already told you, I do business. I've got plenty of clients in this region."

"What I want to know is, what kind of business are we talking about?"

"Curious? I didn't know you were so interested in me."

Matías smirked, narrowing his eyes. He always dodged the point like that. Sometimes, Taekjoo suspected he was involved with the mafia, especially given the armed bodyguards always in tow. Though Matías acted perpetually tipsy, he didn't actually drink much. However, there was something peculiar about his gaze—it always seemed slightly unfocused—and there could only be one reason for that.

"If you're an addict, it's not hard to guess what line of work you're in."

"Do I smell bad?"

Matías mockingly sniffed at himself and chuckled. He didn't bother to excuse or deny it. Instead, he wore that same brazen expression as if he'd known all along he'd been found out.

That Matías might be involved in drug trafficking didn't change much for Taekjoo. After all, he had no legal way of returning to Korea. While he disliked relying on a criminal, there was no guarantee that he himself had been any different before his memory loss. For now, Matías was the only person he could trust. Matías's safety was critical to his own survival.

Taekjoo sharpened his senses and focused on the activity outside his room. Matías's client fit the mold of a stereotypical mobster: the swagger, the flashy attire, the tattoos on his hands and neck, and an air of decadence that clung to him. The pungent scent of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco all but confirmed his identity.

It was said that Turkey, with its diverse ethnic tapestry, had numerous mafia factions, many of which were deeply entrenched. These groups engaged in any lucrative venture—money laundering, drug trafficking, smuggling, violence, kidnapping, and human trafficking. Some even had ties to politics, making them nearly untouchable.

Matías had promised the deal would be quick. So, regardless of who the client was, Taekjoo believed they'd leave as soon as the transaction was done. Just as he was preparing to make his own departure, a scent in the air froze him in place.

It was a familiar smell—dense and rich, like burnt leaves, with a faint aromatic note. His heart suddenly began to race.

Why? Did he know someone from this mafia group?

He flung open the door and glanced toward the stairs. The clients had already gone up to the rooftop. And now, that scent of cigars was growing stronger, making his heart pound even harder.

What could it be? As he stood there, puzzled, Matías appeared at the other end of the hallway with his bodyguards. Their eyes met, and Matías gave him a playful wink, silently mouthing the words: **"Relax, I won't be long."**

Then, he and his men climbed the stairs to the rooftop, following the mobsters who had gone up minutes earlier. Despite his curiosity about the origin of the cigar's familiar scent, Taekjoo chose to wait and observe.

He shut the door and returned inside. Approaching the window once more, he kept an eye on the movements of the mobsters. He had no clear reason for doing so—it was more of a habit than anything else. Meanwhile, his thoughts kept returning to the puzzling familiarity of that cigar scent.

The sky outside was clear, a deep, intense blue with not a single cloud. Below, jagged rock formations blended with colorful hot air balloons, creating a surreal landscape. Everything appeared oddly peaceful.

How much time passed like that? Suddenly, gunshots and screams erupted from the rooftop. The mobsters who had been standing guard outside rushed into the building.

"What the hell?"

Kwon Taekjoo quickly threw the window open and leaned out, peering toward the rooftop. He spotted someone with their hands in the air, pressed against the railing. It was Matías. His voice, trying to de-escalate the situation, was drowned out by the shouting of someone clearly

agitated. Taekjoo couldn't understand what was being said—it was in Turkish—but the situation had obviously taken a turn for the worse.

Matías was in danger.

Taekjoo scanned the room, grabbed the large cushions from the sofa, and tossed them onto the car parked below. Meanwhile, Matías, increasingly cornered, glanced nervously down. Their eyes met, and Taekjoo gestured for him to jump. Matías's expression was one of disbelief, as if Taekjoo had lost his mind.

At that moment, the agitated man began firing wildly. After a moment of hesitation, Matías squeezed his eyes shut and jumped.

"Aaaah!"

"Ha!"

Standing on the windowsill, Taekjoo caught Matías by the arm mid-air. He absorbed the weight momentarily, softening the impact, and both of them crashed onto the car roof. The cushions Taekjoo had thrown earlier cushioned their fall somewhat, but the pain still shot through his body like he was falling apart.

Without a moment to process the pain, Taekjoo started firing at the mobsters rushing to the railing. When he ran out of bullets, he snatched Matías's gun—who was groaning beside him—and shot at the men emerging from the building. However, the ammo soon ran dry again. It was clear they needed to escape.

Grabbing Matías by the scruff of the neck, he shoved him into the backseat of the car. He climbed into the driver's seat and picked up a rifle that had fallen to the ground. The remaining mobsters began firing frantically. With one hand on the wheel, Taekjoo swerved the car and returned fire. Tossing the rifle to Matías, who was only just starting to regain his composure, he shouted, **"Do something!"**

The mobsters stationed at the edge of the village realized something was wrong and blocked their path. Taekjoo floored the gas pedal, crashing through their makeshift blockade. Immediately, the mob's cars gave chase. Just as he wondered how to shake them off, reinforcements appeared behind them. Presumably Matías's bodyguards, they engaged the mobsters from the rear, buying time and pulling the pursuers away from Taekjoo's car.

They managed to get out of Göreme.

Finally, Matías began to sit up, still shaky. Blood soaked his shoulder and side—he'd likely taken a bullet. Ignoring the bleeding, he rummaged through his pockets and pulled out a syringe containing an unknown substance, probably heroin, renowned for its potent numbing effects. After injecting it into his arm, he glanced at the rearview mirror and smiled.

"Want some?"

“Forget it. What happened? You said clients were coming. Were they undercover cops?”

“Cops? In this country? Nah, they’re not that diligent.”

“Then those guys looked like mobsters. Did you mess with their boss’s girlfriend or something?”

“Too many movies, my friend. I don’t get into trouble over women; there are plenty of those around.”

“You seem like the type who would.”

Matías chuckled, clearly high. His glassy eyes and the drool at the corner of his mouth made him look pitiful.

“Turns out there was a misunderstanding. There’s a lot of infighting in their organization. I just delivered what I was supposed to, but now they think I’m siding with one of the traitors. So, I got caught in the crossfire.”

Despite the lives lost and his own brush with death, Matías seemed to take none of it seriously. It wasn’t just the drugs—chaos seemed to excite him. Taekjoo shook his head, incredulous. Suddenly, Matías leaned over, grabbing the steering wheel and bringing his **face close to Taekjoo’s.**

“Anyway, thanks for saving me, buddy. You’re quicker than I thought. Ever thought about being a bodyguard? I’d pay you whatever you want.”

“No, thanks. I just don’t like owing favors.”

Taekjoo didn’t trust Matías’s generosity. He wasn’t the type to offer help without expecting something in return. Taekjoo often wondered what kind of “bill” Matías would eventually present. By saving his life, though, Taekjoo felt he’d balanced the scales. That is, if the debt was ever real and not something he’d imagined.

“Same goes for any other debts,” Taekjoo added, indirectly warning Matías not to try anything.

Matías smirked, patting the headrest before reclining in his seat.

“Got it. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“So, where to now?”

“Don’t worry about trouble with the Turkish government. No one’s going to care that some mobsters causing headaches are gone. In fact, for a lot of bigwigs, it’s a relief they’ve disappeared without a trace—like they devoured each other.”

It was a predictable story. None of those people could be considered innocent. They lived on the edge of death, and their demise wouldn’t surprise anyone or raise suspicion. Finally,

Taekjoo understood why Matías had chosen to make the deal in such a remote area rather than in the city center. Avoiding unnecessary witnesses was always a good strategy.

After a brief pause, Matías handed Taekjoo his phone.

"Still…" he murmured, pointing to a map on the screen that showed an airport as the destination. **"Given the situation, getting to Mexico directly is tricky. I think I'll rest a bit at my villa in Istanbul. Once we're there, I'll set up an escape route for you. Don't worry."**

Istanbul. The city connected to Greece and the Mediterranean, offering an escape route by sea. It was also teeming with tourists, making it easier for Taekjoo to blend in.

Taekjoo glanced at Matías.

"Get some rest," he said.

Then, without wasting any more time, he drove toward their destination.

Yoon Jongwoo looked around in awe. The mansion, an opulent Baroque masterpiece, was breathtaking both outside and within. Its intricate and majestic interior décor was almost overwhelming. Nestled behind an ancient fortress built in the 6th century, the property was so heavily guarded it resembled the summer palace of a sultan. The scale and aura of the place left him both mesmerized and uneasy—his mouth slightly agape, his shoulders drawn in as if by instinct. Who could own such a grand estate? His curiosity was matched only by a growing sense of foreboding.

Distracted by his surroundings, Jongwoo hadn't realized he'd fallen behind Zhenya. The guards stationed throughout the property began to eye him suspiciously. Despite their formal title, these men hardly looked the part of professional security. Tattoos peeked from beneath their tailored suits, their hardened gazes bore into him, and their shoulders were weighted by visible firearms. They exuded an air far closer to organized crime than standard protection. Uneasy, Jongwoo quickened his pace, desperate to rejoin Zhenya and avoid making the wrong impression.

At last, they stopped before an imposing set of double doors. One of the guards rapped on the wood with his knuckles. A voice from within granted entry, and the doors were pulled wide, revealing a sprawling salon. It was almost museum-like, with artwork lining every wall and antique sculptures perched in the corners. A grand chandelier dominated the ceiling, its crystal tiers cascading nearly to the coffee table below, filling the room with an air of extravagance.

At the center of it all, seated on a luxurious sofa, was the presumed owner of the estate. He was a large man with a genial demeanor, but his eyes gleamed with shrewdness and authority. He gestured for them to enter with a flick of his fingers. As they stepped inside, a dense mixture of marijuana, cigars, and other less identifiable substances permeated the air, making Jongwoo instinctively swallow hard.

Zhenya entered confidently, while Jongwoo trailed hesitantly. Before he could follow further, a guard stepped in his path, signaling him to stay put. Jongwoo nodded nervously, staying behind as instructed.

Meanwhile, Zhenya approached the silver-haired man and took a seat beside him. It was the man who extended his hand first.

“It’s been a while, Psych,” the man said.

“Looking good as ever,” Zhenya replied with a crooked smile. **“You prefer being a wild dog to a Kremlin lapdog, huh?”**

“Of course. Serving a greedy master only leads to a dog’s death, don’t you think?”

The two laughed knowingly as they shook hands. After their greeting, the man signaled to his subordinates, who promptly placed a cigar and a glass of whiskey before Zhenya.

The man was Erkan, the head of a Turkish-Cypriot mafia organization whose influence stretched across Turkey, the UK, and Russia—territories where he and Zhenya had crossed paths in the past.

“So, I hear you’re looking for someone,” Erkan said, cutting straight to the point. Zhenya had contacted him beforehand, aware that few were as adept as the mafia at tracking people down.

“I need to find them quickly. This person’s deceit is beyond imagination,” Zhenya said gravely.

“Must be someone special if the great Psych needs help catching them. Who is it?”

“You don’t need to know that. How long will it take?”

Erkan leaned back leisurely, exuding an air of unshakable confidence. He took a slow drag from his cigar before responding.

“Finding them isn’t the problem. But my men aren’t exactly gentle when bringing people in. Since it’s not a woman, is there a reason they need to stay in one piece?” he asked with a sly grin.

“Just find them. I’ll handle the rest.”

“Alright then... Give me a few days. I could act now, but I need to tread carefully. The Kurds have stirred up trouble again,” Erkan said with a shrug.

“Trouble?”

“Seems like some of them turned on each other—and right in a tourist zone, no less. You know how it goes; every time something like this happens, the authorities start ‘restoring order,’ and it’s the rest of us who pay the price. To keep my business intact, I need to stay clear of the fallout.”

Erkan's intel likely came from a high-level source within the government or judiciary, given the intertwined nature of law enforcement and the underworld in the region. But Zhenya couldn't afford to wait for the surveillance to die down. He contemplated taking matters into his own hands, though the thought frustrated him. Then Erkan mentioned an unexpected name.

"I've heard Matías Pérez is tangled up with those troublesome Kurds."

"Matías Pérez? He's here?" Zhenya asked, visibly surprised.

Erkan nodded. Matías being in Turkey for drug dealings wasn't entirely shocking, nor were his connections to the Kurdish mafia. What intrigued Zhenya was why Erkan had brought him up now—it didn't seem like idle gossip.

"When someone of his caliber shows up, we keep tabs. Just like we're watching you, Psych."

Zhenya had anticipated this. For the mafia, protecting and expanding territory was paramount, and any new player in their domain was met with suspicion. To avoid trouble, he'd need to play by their rules. The situation with Matías had clearly caught everyone's attention. Knowing Matías, he was probably relishing the spotlight.

"So, what's your point?" Zhenya asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Word is, Pérez has been seen with an Asian man," Erkan said, eyeing Zhenya intently.

"An Asian? Any details?"

"That's all I've got. Just that this Asian supposedly saved Pérez's life in the chaos."

The possibility that Matías's companion was Kwon Taekjoo seemed slim but not impossible. If Taekjoo had crossed paths with Matías, the latter would likely offer help. Matías knew Taekjoo's worth from their last transaction and had every reason to be generous. For Taekjoo, with his lost memories and isolation, Matías might be the only familiar face he could trust.

"If you're so curious, why not look into it yourself?" Erkan suggested with a sly smile.

"A message to Pérez from you would help. I imagine you're quite busy now that your client is... preoccupied," Zhenya said.

"Excuse me?"

"They say Pérez would do anything for you, Psych. Word is he's obsessed with those toys you make. I'm sure he wouldn't mind hearing from me during a deal."

It was clear Erkan's true aim was to capitalize on the Kurds' power vacuum without directly involving himself in the conflict. Zhenya smirked slightly.

"Fine—if the information's worth it."

“Don’t worry. Even someone as cautious as you wouldn’t act on mere rumors. Besides, there’s another survivor from the chaos. They might’ve gotten a good look at the Asian you’re after.”

Zhenya toyed with his whiskey glass. Normally, he’d take his time to assess whether the deal was worth it or if he could extract more. But his patience was wearing thin.

“Where’s this survivor?”

It was late at night in a general hospital in Tabriz. The door to the quiet intensive care unit creaked open. Until recently, access to this area had been tightly controlled. The police guarding the corridor were gone, and no alarms had gone off to signal an intrusion.

Inside, a patient with multiple gunshot wounds was breathing heavily, a bloody gurgle accompanying every labored inhale. His body was wrapped in bandages from head to toe—head, chest, abdomen, legs. His life hung by a thread, sustained only by the ventilator and a cocktail of medications.

Silently, a figure stepped into the room, its shadow stretching along the wall until it cast a menacing darkness over the patient’s face. The wounded man struggled to open his eyes, and when he did, the sight of the imposing silhouette looming over him sent a surge of terror through his veins. His heart monitor beeped frantically, the rhythm escalating into a shrill alarm.

"There was a shooting earlier, wasn’t there? They say an Asian man was at the scene," the figure’s voice was cold, devoid of any trace of empathy.

The patient, sensing the threat, tried to move, but his limbs were restrained—handcuffed to the bed. Each desperate attempt to free himself only caused the cuffs to jingle in a deafening symphony of futility.

What was worse, despite the noise and the alarming spike in his vital signs, no doctor or police officer appeared. The monitor’s alert blared incessantly, but outside the room, silence reigned—a suffocating void that seemed to swallow the world.

"Is this him?" the intruder asked, holding up a phone screen close to the patient’s face.

The photo displayed the image of a man. But when no clear response came, the stranger grabbed the patient’s jaw with brutal force, his grip threatening to crush it. The pain shot through the patient’s skull like lightning.

“Mmmf, mmm...”

"Look closely. Is this the person who disappeared with Matías?"

The patient, fully aware that his life was on the line, summoned every ounce of strength he could muster. He wanted to scream, to plead for help, but the ventilator muffled his attempts,

rendering his cries incomprehensible. His breath grew weaker, his vision dimmer. He knew that losing consciousness now would mean certain death.

Fighting the overwhelming exhaustion, he forced his eyes open again, focusing intently on the phone. The screen showed the photo of an Asian man. Even if it was just a fleeting memory, the face was unmistakable. He remembered seeing it clearly.

With all the strength he could muster, the patient nodded. When the intruder asked, **"Are you sure?"** he blinked repeatedly to confirm. Finally, the crushing grip on his jaw released.

The stranger slipped out of the ICU as silently as he had entered. Once the shadow vanished, the patient, frozen in terror until now, collapsed into unconsciousness. Slowly, his erratic heart rate steadied, and the room regained its eerie calm, as if nothing had happened.

The only trace of the intruder was a faint smell of cigarette smoke, lingering in the sterile air tainted with the scent of disinfectant.

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Chapter End Notes

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So Close Yet So Far

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•PERSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Through the sheer curtains, bright sunlight slipped in softly. The fabric swayed with a nearly imperceptible breeze, filling the room with a warm and inviting atmosphere. The warmth settling on his skin felt tickling, almost comforting.

In his hand, he held a fragrant apple. As he took a bite, a flood of sweet, tart juice filled his mouth, sending a pleasant tingle along his jaw. Each bite crunched between his teeth, and as he swallowed, he found himself craving more. Unable to help it, juice began to drip, trickling down his chest. Instinctively, he sat up quickly, letting the drops slide slowly down his torso. He wiped his chest with the back of his hand, but only managed to leave both his hand and chest sticky.

He frowned slightly, just as a shadow fell over him. Moments later, a warm, soft tongue brushed against his damp hand. Looking up, he met a face so pale it was nearly ethereal. They were close enough to feel the cool touch of the other's skin. Those eyes, cold as shards of ice, held him captive in an instant.

"..."

Kwon Taekjoo stared into the blue eyes in front of him, taking another bite of the apple. The juice mercilessly dripped, wetting his fingers.

"Taekjoo..."

The other man's soft lips grazed his damp hand, creating a light, wet sound. The sweet scent of apple filled the air with each breath. Then, his red tongue slowly ran over Taekjoo's fingers, licking them clean without breaking eye contact.

Taekjoo dropped the apple to the side, and without thinking, grabbed the other man's hair. The eager gaze directed at him softened as the man's long lashes, heavy with desire, quivered and brushed against his cheeks. That large body drew close with surprising gentleness, wrapping around him in an embrace that was both warm and disarming.

Kwon Taekjoo buried his face in the other's neck, inhaling deeply. His heart, which had been calm until recently, now raced. A pale hand stroked his cheek, and soon their lips met in a slow kiss, exploring every corner of his mouth. At first, he tasted the sweetness of the apple; but as their tongues intertwined passionately, only the raw and visceral flavor of their mingled breaths remained.

As his body relaxed, his mind was on fire. He exhaled heavily, trying to contain the euphoria building within. Lazily, he stroked the nape of the other's neck, who clung to him, breathing in gasps, rubbing his forehead against Taekjoo's cheek. His nose brushed constantly along his jaw and neck, breathing in his scent as if he might bite at any moment. Taekjoo, feeling both anxiety and anticipation, gently caressed him to calm him.

"Easy… There's no rush."

He whispered in his ear, stroking him tenderly, as if trying to tame a wild beast. The other frowned and exhaled sharply. When Taekjoo squeezed his earlobe, he saw a shiver run down his neck and back.

"Ah... Taekjoo…"

The man looked at him with fierce intensity, his blue eyes blazing with searing passion. Taekjoo placed a hand over his lips before he could move closer, but the other took one of his fingers and began to lick it insistently, nibbling softly on his skin, his thick tongue tracing every crease. That small gesture sent a wave of heat through Taekjoo, an undeniable promise of what was to come.

Suddenly, as his partner breathed quietly behind his hand, he lunged toward him. His arms were raised and pressed together, and his legs were stretched out without any modesty. His partner drew Taekjoo's damp hand toward his hidden hole. Preparing his entrance for a fuck was a natural process. However, doing it with fingers covered in juice and saliva felt strange and uncomfortable. The unfamiliar sensation made all his senses go on high alert.

"Ah, ugh... Wait. This is weird, wait a minute, ugh..."

"No, it's not weird, Taekjoo."

A pale hand covered Taekjoo's own. Then, the long fingers thoroughly caressed the orifice's folds, pressing his hand even harder. Just by pressing the opening like this, his knees trembled. Finally, his partner overlapped his fingers over Taekjoo's and inserted them firmly inside his hole. The entrance opened smoothly, squeezing both fingers tightly. The delicate inner wall wrapped gently around the fingers, shuddering with anticipation. A soft chuckle was heard near Kwon Taekjoo's head.

"Do you feel it? Even with just a small thrust, you're already enjoying it."

“Ugh... Shut up.”

“You want me with your whole body, yet you're so shy.”

“Who...”

“Isn't it?”

Taekjoo's partner slowly withdrew his fingers from his hole, scraping the inner wall with his fingertips. The reaction was instantaneous: his abdominal muscles tensed and his toes curled. The tight interior wrapped tightly around his partner's digits, which were about to pop out.

“Huh? That tight?”

“Stop playing around. If you're going to do it, do it right.”

“Sure, you're much more adorable when you're honest.”

“Crazy bastard! What's so adorable about-... ah!”

Intertwined fingers buried themselves deep inside him. The sensation of his hole enveloping the fingers was so vivid it was unnerving. He wondered why it felt so strange to stimulate himself like this, though it wasn't entirely out of his own volition.

His partner positioned Taekjoo's fingers, repeatedly stroking the most sensitive places as he caressed him. Despite his attempts to resist, his waist trembled involuntarily. The intense pleasure made his chest visibly swell. Taekjoo tried to grit his teeth to hold on, but more and more unexpected moans escaped him.

“Ugh, ah... Shit! Until when are you gonna fool around?”

“Don't be impatient. You're already enjoying yourself on the inside as well as the outside. Relax a little more, Taekjoo.”

With his partner's knee supporting his back, his body was almost bent in half. With one hand still trapped by his partner, he could barely support himself with his other shoulder. Blood was flowing rapidly to his face, and his mind was numb. Although his head was clouding over, the feeling of being penetrated was becoming clearer and clearer.

Through his blurred vision, he saw the pale face of his partner slowly approaching. It looked like he was about to lick his insides without hesitation. Just as his partner's tongue was about to touch his sensitive skin, the hole contracted and closed. His partner smiled with narrowed eyes. Frustrated, Taekjoo clenched his fist, but the warm tongue had already reached his hole. His body reacted jerkily, and his fist shook uncontrollably, limp and weak.

“Ugh, uh... You didn't need to lick me.”

His partner didn't flinch and kept rolling his tongue around. The fingers that were inside his hole were also being rubbed and squashed by the soft flesh. The skin around the opening

seemed to slowly melt. It was a very tingly and prickly sensation that caused his waist to twist repeatedly.

As the other person's saliva mixed with the insides of his hole, it became more slippery. His partner eventually added a third finger, circling Kwon Taekjoo's own and moved them inside in circles. He leaned deeper to lick Kwon Taekjoo's perineum and then sucked both of Taekjoo's testicles. Kwon Taekjoo's ears, already flushed, were rubbed and flattened against the bed pillow.

“Stop, that... ah, uhh...”

His partner pulled away, making a sucking sound with his lips. The testicles, which had been toyed in his mouth, bounced out elastically.

“...Ah, stop?”

“Uhh, hurry...use yours...”

“What do you want me to do, Taekjoo?”

“Don't ask...ahh, hurry...”

Eagerly, Taekjoo grabbed his partner's cock. The moment his hole and the shaft touched, it felt as if the other person's body swelled enormously. He gulped at the sweet torture that was about to come. Taekjoo's body tensed and shifted into a comfortable position.

His partner suppressed his simmering lust and continued slowly. The inner walls, expanded to the maximum, embraced and squeezed his cock as if waiting. An absurd laugh escaped from Taekjoo's partner.

“Taekjoo. Taekjoo....”

Kwon Taekjoo wished he was fucking him furiously, but instead, the other person was calling Kwon Taekjoo's name while moving his hips in a deep and relaxed way. He would slowly thrust from the tip to the base, ramming all the way in and then pulling out again just as leisurely. Thanks to this, every angle and touch of the other person's cock would clearly be engraved in Taekjoo's mind.

“No, ah... don't do it like this...”

“Ah, why, isn't that how lovers do it?”

“Ah, it's weird... ah, do it like usual.”

“Really? Hmm, you want me to fuck you so hard you can't breathe?”

“Oh yes, ah... hurry...”

The corner of the other person's mouth curved upward. In an instant, his partner firmly grabbed Kwon Taekjoo's arms and began thrusting into him with explosive intensity. The

other person's thighs and Kwon Taekjoo's ass cheeks collided with force, producing a continuous slapping sound. It wouldn't be surprising if bruises appeared on his thighs.

“Ah, ugh, ahh, ahh, mmm, ugh, there, there... ahh, yes mmm...!”

“Ah, Taekjoo... are you satisfied now, hmm?”

“Ahh, gentle, gentle... ugh! Mmm, yes, ahh, ugh!”

“You say I give it to you hard, then gentle, so now what rhythm do you want?”

“Shit, ah! Ahh, there, there... mmm!”

“Mmm, Taekjoo... Taekjoo...”

Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t shake the sound of the other person’s voice calling his name; it echoed relentlessly in his ears. The other, seeming close to his breaking point, rubbed his head against Taekjoo’s neck. Overwhelmed by a feeling he didn’t fully understand, Taekjoo clung to him desperately. But it wasn’t enough. He felt he needed more. He wanted to be even closer, craving a deeper, more complete connection in their most intimate places.

“Hah!”

As he opened his eyes, the bright ceiling immediately filled his vision. His eyelids trembled as though in a spasm, shadows from his lashes shifting. He let out a held breath and squeezed his eyes shut. The cold sweat that had soaked his body slid down his heated skin, forming tiny droplets. His heart was pounding so hard his chest ached.

Was it a dream? It had to be. He couldn't have had such an intimate tryst with another man, especially when he himself had asked to be fucked from behind.

But everything in the dream had felt too real. The temperature, the humidity, the smells—even the illusory sensations—seemed imprinted on his body. He could still feel the touch of the hands caressing him. Yet he couldn’t recall the person’s face, nor the voice that desperately called his name. Who was that person? Did someone like that actually exist? Or was it merely a fantasy conjured by the dream?

He had never imagined anything like that in his life, and it sent a chill down his spine. It had truly been a nightmare.

He had had countless dreams, and maybe they were all fragments of memories from his past that Taekjoo had forgotten. Upon waking, some of those memories returned vividly, while others faded away, leaving only blurred, lingering images.

“Ah…”

He paused as he tried to dry his face with his hands, feeling a strange feeling in the lower part of his body. His crotch was unusually sensitive, and the blanket over him had tented slightly. Had he really woken up with a hard-on after that dream? After being fucked by a man?

“Dammit!”

Taekjoo squished his crotch with a pillow, irritated. There was no way his hard cock would calm down on its own. Perhaps he had gone without satisfying his sexual desires for so long that any extraneous stimulation triggered an erection. Why was his body so unnecessarily healthy?

Taekjoo restlessly scratched the back of his neck and hurried to the bathroom. He turned on the shower and soaked himself with cold water. Although the icy water poured down his body, the lingering heat in his crotch did not abate.

He sighed, leaning his forehead against the wall and began stroking his cock with his bare hands. Even though he was well past puberty, the inside of his genitals remained sensitive during masturbation.

“Uhh, hhn...”

He clenched his teeth tightly to muffle his moans. In his rush to relieve the discomfort, his hand grew rougher and moved faster, nails lightly scratching his skin. A shiver ran down his spine, and the hair on his ears stood on end.

“Damn… ugh… ah…”

He stilled and went back to stroking the glans with his thumb, twirling it gently. His fully erect cock twitched, unsatisfied with the stimulation. The tingling sensation was not spreading pleasantly, but building up heavily in his lower abdomen.

As he cursed, he began to stroke his chest, without any sign of relief, pulling and twisting his nipples. Finally, he began to move his hand, relieving the heat that had built up in one place. The heat of his groin and scrotum collided intensely with his hand.

A little more. Just a little more.

He became anxious and bit his lower lip. The pleasurable feeling that expanded from his crotch to his abdomen was synchronized with the speed of his hand, spreading down his spine, his neck, and finally to his mind. His breathing grew ragged, and his vision blurred, feeling his head spinning.

“Aah, mmm...”

The next moment, his contracting buttocks quivered and slammed hard against his hand. The glans, flattened against the smooth tiles, spilled. Thick, sticky semen spurted endlessly. The color of his come, evidenced how stimulated he had been.

His previously tense abdomen relaxed and continued to twitch with convulsions. His shoulders and chest also jerked as he exhaled shakily. The warmth that had invaded his body suddenly vanished, leaving him in a cold sweat.

“Haah, haah...”

Taekjoo leaned back against the wall, breathing deeply. It was strange; although he had reached orgasm, he didn't feel completely relieved. Was it that masturbating wasn't enough to satiate his desire? His body seemed to crave a deeper, more intense stimulation.

Disheveled and on edge, he ran his hands through his hair, trying to gather his thoughts. In a bid to calm himself, he splashed cold water on his face, letting the droplets offer fleeting relief. Then, he stepped into the shower, scrubbing his skin vigorously as if trying to erase the lingering sensations. No matter how hard he rubbed, the reddish marks on his chest—remnants of pinches and pressure—refused to fade.

Clicking his tongue in frustration, he quickly dried off and threw on a robe he found hanging nearby. He strode to the window, threw it open wide, and let the cool breeze fill the room.

From the large window frame, he could take in a breathtaking view of Istanbul. The city stretched before him, with the Bosphorus Strait dividing the Asian and European sides. To the left was the Mediterranean Sea; to the right, the Black Sea. The flawless blue sky mirrored in the shimmering waters, where white yachts and cruise ships glided smoothly, leaving trails of foam in their wake.

They had reached Istanbul in a small plane after narrowly escaping Cappadocia. According to Matías, this chalet was one of his regular summer hideouts. He had even offered Taekjoo free use of his private yacht, telling him to enjoy it as much as he pleased. But Matías, having dislocated his shoulder and taken a bullet during their escape, was confined to bed, recovering under a doctor’s watchful eye.

Kwon Taekjoo had also been examined by Matías’s physician after spraining his wrist while assisting him during the escape. Fortunately, it was a minor sprain and didn’t hinder his movements. Despite his desire to return to Korea as soon as possible, he couldn’t rush Matías in his condition. All he could do was wait a little longer.

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. He stayed silent, observing. Out of habit, the intruder picked the lock and opened the door. Without thinking, Taekjoo grabbed a candle from the windowsill and hurled it accurately at the newcomer. Matías ducked just in time, dodging the object with ease.

“Well, well! You’re awake,” Matías said with an easygoing grin.

“Why do you always barge in like this?” Taekjoo snapped, visibly annoyed.

“And why don’t you answer when I knock? Were you hoping I’d come in uninvited? Maybe secretly waiting for it?” Matías teased, raising an eyebrow.

“Had you thrown a knife instead…” Matías mused with a lopsided grin as he picked up the candle from the floor. Bending down, he winced slightly, placing a hand on his injured side. He set the candle on a nearby table and lit the wick with a lighter from his pocket. Within seconds, the room filled with the sweet aroma of dark berries.

“I told you, I’m not here to harass you. I was just concerned. When someone I’ve invited to my home goes quiet, the least I can do is check if they’re still alive or passed

out somewhere."

"Look who's talking, you look like you're about to collapse," Taekjoo retorted sarcastically.

Matías chuckled lightly, ignoring the jab. He poured himself a glass of whiskey from the bar, lifted it for a sip, and pointed at Taekjoo with the glass.

"You've got impressive endurance, I'll admit that. And… quite the cushion."

Though spoken playfully, the suggestive undertone wasn't lost on Taekjoo. He frowned and adjusted his robe, which had opened enough to reveal the red marks on his chest, still imprinted from earlier. Ignoring the discomfort, he cut straight to the point.

"What do you want? Shouldn't you be in bed?"

"Thanks for the concern, but I can't starve to death. I came to invite you to dinner."

"You could eat just fine on your own."

"We're sharing this house; it'd be rude not to interact. I was taught to treat guests well."

"Oh really? Is this your idea of treating people well? Because I don't see it."

"Don't be unfair. In any case, I'm a victim here too," Matías replied with a mock hurt expression. Leaving his glass on the table, he headed toward the door.

Just as he was about to leave, he paused, adding lightly, **"Come down. We also need to discuss how you're getting back home."**

Without waiting for a response, Matías left the room, leaving Taekjoo staring at the closed door in exasperation.

Kwon Taekjoo and Matías sat across from each other at a wide dining table. The space, semicircular and surrounded by glass walls, offered a stunning view and bathed the room in warm daylight. A gentle sea breeze drifted in through the slightly open window, refreshing the atmosphere.

Matías, nonchalantly, uncorked a bottle of wine. Taekjoo distinctly remembered the doctor advising Matías to avoid alcohol, tobacco, and any drugs during his recovery. Apparently, the advice had fallen on deaf ears. With practiced ease, Matías poured himself a glass and extended the bottle toward Taekjoo.

"Care for some?"

"Why don't you use these tricks on women instead of wasting your time with me?" Taekjoo replied coldly.

"It's not a trick. I'm just trying to ease the tension."

“Seems relaxed enough to me. How much more do you need?”

“I’d say right now, this feels more… bland. Almost arid,” Matías countered, swirling his glass with an exaggerated look of sorrow.

Taekjoo regarded him with disdain. He couldn’t stand his attitude. Despite being injured, Matías had taken the time to style his hair perfectly and wear ostentatious accessories that gleamed under the light. Every time their eyes met, he flashed a sly smile that only irritated him further.

“No matter what you do, there’s no way this becomes ‘pleasant,’” Taekjoo shot back sarcastically. **“Between guys like us, it’s just uncomfortable.”**

Matías laughed, a genuine and almost boisterous sound.

“That’s funny,” he remarked cryptically, as if speaking to himself.

His habit of dodging serious conversations with jokes and smiles was starting to grate on Taekjoo’s nerves.

“Cut the games and get to the point. How much longer do I have to wait?” he demanded firmly.

“Such impatience. Sometimes, it’s good to just go with the flow and relax, don’t you think? Besides, you probably haven’t recovered all your memories yet.”

Taekjoo crossed his arms, determined to get answers. He couldn’t keep delaying his return indefinitely, nor was he willing to stay there until his memory fully returned.

Before he could press further, a buzzing sound interrupted the conversation. Both turned their attention to Matías’s phone. He checked the screen, and a faint smile played on his lips. It seemed to be a call he had been expecting, but to Taekjoo’s surprise, Matías didn’t answer. Instead, he flipped the phone face down and left it on the table.

“You could answer if you want,” Taekjoo said, raising an eyebrow.

"Ah, it’s not an urgent call,” Matías said nonchalantly.

"If it’s something sensitive, I can step out," Taekjoo offered.

"You know," Matías began with a sly grin, **"sometimes it’s better to keep them waiting. Makes me seem more valuable, don’t you think?"**

Taekjoo couldn’t help but roll his eyes. For someone who neither stopped women from leaving nor chased after them, this so-called Casanova’s act of playing hard to get was laughable. With a sigh, he looked down at his plate and resumed eating. He grabbed a piece of simit bread, smeared it with kaymak and honey, and chewed mechanically. He shoveled a few bites of the sunny-side-up eggs onto his spoon and forced them down, but the meal felt heavy, like a lump in his throat.

It hit him then—he didn't know how long he'd been away from Korea, but he desperately missed a hearty, spicy bowl of soup. He halfheartedly dipped his spoon into the tomato-based chorba, hoping it might satisfy his craving. It didn't.

Matías chuckled, a glint of amusement in his eyes. **"That's quite the face you're making."**

Taekjoo flipped him off, opting to drown the greasy sensation in his stomach with a strong cup of coffee. The bitter brew did its job, cutting through the heaviness and sliding down his throat with a refreshing bitterness. If only it were iced coffee—it would have been even better. As he considered asking for some ice, his gaze drifted toward the kitchen. Matías tapped the table, drawing his attention back.

"Why don't you talk about yourself a little?" Matías asked, leaning forward.

"Are you out of your mind? I'd need to actually remember something first," Taekjoo retorted.

"You said you recalled something about your family."

"And that means I'm going to spill my entire family history to you?"

"Fair point," Matías admitted, shrugging. **"But have you remembered anything else? I need to know what you did in Korea and who might be after you. That way, I can get you a new passport suited to your situation. The last thing I want is to hear that you got caught and it was all for nothing."**

It was clear Matías genuinely didn't know much about Taekjoo. If Matías had wanted to, he could've easily uncovered his identity by now—he had ample opportunity to collect fingerprints or DNA while they were living under the same roof. The fact that he hadn't meant one of two things: either Matías was being uncharacteristically honest, or Taekjoo's identity was far better protected than he'd thought.

If he was going to piece together the truth about himself, he needed to start gathering whatever fragmented clues he could.

"Then tell me," Taekjoo said, leaning back in his chair, **"about the first time you met me."**

"Hmm? Didn't I already go over that?" Matías replied, feigning innocence as he swirled the wine in his glass.

"Give me more details. Until then, you're saying you had no idea who I was?" Taekjoo pressed.

"That's right. I met you for the first time then," Matías replied casually.

"So, you're saying I had nothing to do with your... business?"

Matías nodded confidently. Taekjoo thought to himself that if he'd ever been involved with drugs, resisting their allure as he did now would've been nearly impossible.

"You said I was being chased by the Cuban government back then. Do you really have no idea why? No guesses at all?"

"None whatsoever."

"And yet, you decided to help some guy on the run, not knowing why or who he was? You do realize you could've been implicated as an accomplice, right?"

Taekjoo raised a skeptical eyebrow, his expression clearly questioning if Matías was really that altruistic. Matías just shrugged nonchalantly, a faint smirk playing on his lips as if to say, *"believe what you want."*

For all his charm, Matías had acted surprisingly magnanimous. He'd provided Taekjoo with a comfortable place to stay, good food, and even small conveniences. According to Matías, they'd only met because of someone named "Psych." Was Matías just so well-off that he could afford to be this generous?

But no. Taekjoo was certain of one thing—no one in the world offers kindness without expecting something in return. Especially not someone aiming to become a drug kingpin. The idea was laughable.

"You said I came with this Psych guy. What kind of person is he?" Taekjoo asked.

"Oh, Psych? Think of him as an arms dealer. Only deals in weapons he designs himself."

"An arms dealer..." Taekjoo muttered to himself. The nickname "Psych" already sounded ominous, but to learn he was in the weapons trade? Had Taekjoo himself been involved in the arms industry? Or was he some kind of illicit broker?

The arms trade straddled the line between legitimate and underground dealings. It didn't matter if the products were used ethically or for crime. If Taekjoo had been tangled up in something like that, it wasn't all that surprising the Cuban government would be after him.

How had he gotten involved with Psych in the first place? And what about the Russian ambassador his mother had mentioned? If a high-ranking diplomat was involved, could it mean Psych's weapons deals were part of some Russian state project?

The last clear memory Taekjoo had was enrolling in mechanical engineering at a Korean university. It was possible his interest in mechanics and design had led him to weapons. Maybe his time in the military solidified his career path. He tried to piece together fragments of memory, constructing a coherent picture in his mind.

Matías, who had been silently observing, suddenly added, **"He's also got close ties to the mafia."**

"The mafia?" The unexpected connection derailed Taekjoo's thoughts.

At the same time, he felt a faint itch beneath the tattoo on his inner thigh. It was the only visible tattoo on his body, but there was a faded mark above his hip—evidence of a larger

design that had been removed. Were these tattoos somehow connected to the mafia too?

Given what little he'd seen of Matías and Psych, it wasn't shocking that they had ties to organized crime. What baffled him was how *he* had ended up on such a dark path. Had he suddenly decided to rebel against the world? Had losing both his father and brother pushed him over the edge?

Even with his memory gone, Taekjoo couldn't shake how foreign his past self felt. The more he learned, the more alien it all seemed. And now, he couldn't help but wonder if Matías was telling him the whole truth.

"If you're lying to me about any of this—" Taekjoo began.

"Lying? Why would I?"

"..."

"Believe it or not, Psych is also a government official," Matías added with a mischievous grin.

Taekjoo's face twisted at the absurdity of the statement. Watching his reaction, Matías chuckled softly before breaking into a hearty laugh.

"You've got to be kidding me," Taekjoo snapped, standing abruptly. The table rattled, and the plates clinked loudly. If Matías had been within reach, Taekjoo might have grabbed him by the collar and shaken him.

"Unbelievable, right? Feels like nonsense, doesn't it? But it's the truth. That's who Psych is," Matías said, still smirking.

"...What?" Taekjoo stared at him with narrowed eyes, trying to gauge if he was being mocked. Despite Matías's playful demeanor, he didn't seem to be lying.

What kind of government official was closely tied to the mafia and personally designed weapons? Then again, this was Russia, where mafia figures had infiltrated high-ranking positions before. It wasn't inconceivable, given the country's chaotic history through the 1990s.

But the more Taekjoo learned about Psych, the harder it became to reconcile this version of himself with the one from his last memory. How could the engineering student he once was have ended up mingling with someone like Psych?

Just then, Matías's phone buzzed. He didn't bother checking the caller ID, as if he already knew who it was. The vibration stopped momentarily, only to start again a few seconds later.

"Why don't you just answer it?" Taekjoo asked.

"Hmm. Maybe I will," Matías said, leisurely tapping the call button. He brought the phone to his ear and lowered the volume.

"Oh, what a surprise. You're calling me first for once," Matías greeted, his tone light and teasing. A sly smile spread across his face.

"You're in Turkey right now, aren't you?" the voice on the other end said.

"And how did you know that? Could it be you missed me after all?" Matías quipped.

"Everyone seems to know,"

"Didn't realize I had so many admirers," Matías said with a chuckle.

"I need to see you,"

"What's this about?"

"I'd rather discuss it in person."

"Hmm. Well, my health hasn't been great lately," Matías replied, though it was a flimsy excuse. His shoulders weren't in the best shape, but he wasn't exactly bedridden. Clearly, he wasn't eager to meet the caller.

"Then it'd be easier if I came to you as a guest, wouldn't it?"

Whatever the caller said next caused Matías's smile to falter ever so slightly. It was such a subtle change that Taekjoo almost missed it.

"Scary," Matías said, his voice still playful but with a hint of unease. His hand absently toyed with the knife on the table, a gesture that suggested he was carefully weighing his options.

Taekjoo pretended not to care, but his ears were tuned to every word. The faint hum of the caller's voice barely reached him, yet he couldn't stop himself from focusing intently. His heart raced, as if he were eavesdropping on something forbidden.

"Fine," Matías finally said. **"I'll let you know when and where."**

"Just so you know, my patience isn't limitless,"

"Understood. But give me enough time to prepare properly. I've got my pride, you know."

It seemed like the call was wrapping up. In response, Taekjoo began chewing on a piece of stale bread, slowly and deliberately. But the moment Matías said, "Ah," his jaw froze mid-chew.

"Of course, you're welcome to come empty-handed. But if you decide to bring a gift, I'll gladly accept it," Matías added with a playful tone.

Matías ended the call with a smirk. **"When I was the one chasing after them, they wouldn't even look my way. Now, a little hard-to-get act and they're desperate to meet."**

Taekjoo gave a vague hint about the person Matías had been speaking with on the phone. An ex? The voice sounded more male than female, but he couldn't be sure. There was also the possibility that Matías might be bisexual.

"Someone's coming to visit for a bit. Would you mind stepping out for a while?"

"Do I have to? If I stay holed up in my room, they won't even know I'm here."

"Well... we might end up having some *intense physical conversation,* you know."

Matthias winked, and the memory of Cappadocia immediately came to Taekjoo's mind. Back then, Matthias had called women over to his room next door, indulging in a night of booze, drugs, and loud, unrestrained sex. Taekjoo had tried to ignore it, but the incessant banging of the headboard against the wall and the unrelenting moans kept him awake all night. If the person Matthias had just spoken to was another romantic fling, there was no guarantee that such a sleepless night wouldn't happen again.

Besides, Taekjoo had things he wanted to look into, away from Matthias's watchful eye. No matter how much he owed Matthias for his help, relying on him too heavily would only put his life in Matthias's hands. And there was nothing to stop Matthias from stabbing him in the back if it suited him.

He accepted Matthias's suggestion without hesitation.

"Sure. I was starting to get restless anyway, so this works out."

"While you're out, why don't you take some passport photos, grab something you like to eat, and enjoy the charm of Istanbul as a layover spot? I'll assign you some security."

Security? More like surveillance. Even if his memory was a mess, Taekjoo doubted he couldn't protect himself.

"Forget the security..."

He stabbed at a piece of bread with his fork. His lips twitched as if he were about to say something, but the slight downturn at the corners of his mouth betrayed his reluctance. Matthias, watching Taekjoo squirm, seemed to realize something.

"Ah," Matthias said, snapping his fingers to call over one of his subordinates. He whispered a few instructions, and the man placed a stack of cash, a credit card, and a phone in front of Taekjoo.

"I've installed an anti-tracking app on the phone. Use it as much as you like. And pick any car you want from the garage."

"I'll pay it all back later, so keep track of it."

Taekjoo muttered under his breath instead of offering thanks. For someone who supposedly couldn't live with debts, he also seemed quite clumsy when it came to expressing gratitude.

“Sure, whatever. I’ve got to go meet my guest now. Make sure your photos come out pretty,” Matthias said, standing up slowly and throwing him a wink. Taekjoo grimaced, and Matthias laughed heartily before striding out of the dining room.

Taekjoo rose from his seat soon after. Out in the hallway, he asked the guard stationed nearby for directions to the garage. Without a word, the man led the way, stopping in front of what seemed like a large warehouse before returning to his post.

Was this really the garage? It felt more like a storage facility. Hesitant, Taekjoo pressed a button on the wall, and the door began to rise. Lights automatically flickered on, revealing a scene straight out of a luxury car showroom. Sleek vehicles were lined up with precision, each radiating an undeniable aura of extravagance. Their colors alone were anything but ordinary—each car seemed to scream, *Look at me!*

Taekjoo sighed, shielding his eyes with a hand.

“...What a lunatic,” he muttered.

Picking the most unassuming car he could find, he drove out of the villa. Almost immediately, he noticed the surveillance. They didn’t tail him too closely but stayed just within sight—visible enough in his side mirror to make their presence known. Their excuse of “protection” was as unwelcome as it was obvious.

As soon as he reached the old town district, he parked the car in a random spot. The trailing vehicles didn’t stop but continued past him. Taekjoo casually joined the bustling crowds, slipping into a busy shopping street. It didn’t take long for the surveillance team to catch up, maintaining a slight distance. Clearly, they intended to report every move he made to Matthias by the end of the day.

A question suddenly crossed his mind. What would they do if he tried to run? Would they come after him no matter what?

Would they still call that “protection”? Depending on how they reacted, he might get a better sense of Matthias’s true intentions.

As he strolled past the rows of shops, he kept an eye on his followers. They walked by without stopping when he did—clearly, they weren’t amateurs. They knew better than to make their surveillance too obvious.

Interesting.

Pulling out his phone, he pretended to be a tourist, snapping pictures of the surrounding scenery. The move seemed to rattle his watchers; they quickly slipped out of his camera’s frame, pretending to browse nearby stalls as if distracted. Their clumsy attempts at subtlety made Taekjoo’s lips twitch with a faint smirk.

Taekjoo seized the moment, darting into a narrow alley between an open-air café and a candle shop. He sprinted through the crowded streets packed with tourists, weaving swiftly

past the bustling crowd. Before long, the commotion behind him confirmed his pursuers had caught on. A quick glance back showed them cutting through the throng, chasing after him.

So, it's not just "protection" after all, he thought with a smirk, his pace never faltering. Despite the situation, adrenaline surged through him, electrifying his senses in a way he couldn't quite explain.

Dodging pedestrians and obstacles with precision, he suddenly encountered an unexpected challenge: a tour guide waving a flag leading a group of tourists directly toward him. The narrow street offered no easy way to avoid them.

"Ahhh!"

"Watch out!"

Panicked shouts erupted as the tourists braced themselves, covering their heads. Without slowing down, Taekjoo propelled himself against the wall, using its surface to vault over the group. As he landed back on the ground, he nearly collided with the person at the rear of the group.

Acting on instinct, he grabbed the man's shoulders, spun him aside, and steadied himself on the ground. ***"Sorry!"*** he blurted before dashing off again.

Behind him, the pursuers struggled to push their way through the startled tourists, their progress noticeably slowed. Meanwhile, Taekjoo broke free into an open shopping plaza. As he turned a corner, he quickly scanned the buildings. The uniform rows of structures featured rain gutters along the rooftops, with elbow joints connecting them to drainage pipes below.

Using his momentum, he leapt, grabbed the gutter's elbow joint, and swung himself onto the roof. By the time his pursuers arrived, Taekjoo had disappeared from sight. Confused, they searched the area, craning their necks and scanning the bustling street below. Unable to locate him, they split up—some heading down alleys, others into nearby shops.

From above, Taekjoo moved swiftly, jumping from one rooftop to the next. When taller buildings appeared, he didn't hesitate, scaling higher ledges with ease. Slipping into an upper-level entrance of a building, he navigated past unseen hallways and eventually exited through a back door, avoiding any attention. Though he wasn't yet fully recovered from his injuries, his agility made it seem effortless. If anything, it felt invigorating—like a proper workout after too much idleness.

His escape route ended at an internet café. While Matthias's phone could connect to the internet, it wasn't worth the risk of being tracked. In his current state, Taekjoo trusted no one —not even himself.

The Turkish internet café had a different vibe from the PC bangs of Korea, but the gaming posters on the walls hinted at decent equipment. He handed over some cash to the owner and pointed toward a secluded corner. The man nodded, though he continued to keep a close eye on Taekjoo's every move. Other customers, curious about the conspicuous foreigner, kept stealing glances at him as well.

Taekjoo sighed, realizing he couldn’t stay here for long.

As soon as Taekjoo sat down, he connected to the internet and searched for information about the Russian ambassador. Several names popped up, but one stood out immediately. Unlike the others, this individual was significantly younger and had striking looks—so much so that he could easily pass as an actor or model. His name was Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov, the Russian ambassador to South Korea.

"Could this be the ambassador my mother mentioned?" he wondered, uncertain.

Switching to a Russian portal site, Taekjoo entered Bogdanov's name into the search bar. Surprisingly, there was little information about his activities in Russia. The last major news report about him was from three years ago, when he was appointed as the Russian ambassador to South Korea. It was odd—typically, someone in such a high-ranking diplomatic position would have frequent media coverage, from attending minor ceremonies to making official statements.

"Could someone have scrubbed his records on purpose?" Taekjoo thought.

The oddities didn’t stop there.

"They made someone this young an ambassador?"

No matter how he looked at it, Bogdanov seemed far too young for the role. In fact, "young" didn’t even seem adequate—he looked like a teenager in some photos. Taekjoo initially assumed the images were from earlier in Bogdanov’s life, but there wasn’t a single picture showing him looking older.

He checked the ambassador’s date of birth. Bogdanov was four years younger than Taekjoo.

An ambassador is typically a seasoned diplomat chosen to represent their country, a role requiring gravitas and experience. Even if Russia’s governance had a certain slapdash quality, or even if they didn’t prioritize their relationship with South Korea, it seemed unimaginable for them to appoint someone so inexperienced.

“What’s the story behind this kid landing a position like that?” Taekjoo muttered, intrigued.

Thinking it over, he decided to try a different approach.

“Vissarion Bogdanov…”

He recalled that Russians often used patronymics in their middle names. From Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov’s full name, he deduced that his father’s name must be Vissarion, of the Bogdanov family.

When he hit enter, the results were far more revealing. Vissarion had a significantly higher public profile than his son. The most notable detail was his tenure as the head of Gazprom, Russia’s state-owned gas company. Numerous articles also described the Bogdanov family as wielding immense influence behind the scenes of Russian power.

Given Vissarion’s background and his sons’ impressive résumés, it wasn’t hard to believe the family played a key role in Russia’s inner political workings.

The eldest son, Vladimir, succeeded Vissarion in overseeing Gazprom and other energy industries. The second son, Bazim, was the president's closest confidant, effectively serving as the second most powerful figure in Russia. And the youngest, Yevgeny, held a prominent position as a high-ranking diplomat. It was no exaggeration to say that this family had a hand in steering the entirety of Russia.

Taekjoo couldn't help but wonder how he had become entangled with the youngest member of such a powerful dynasty. And who exactly was this "Psych" person who had suddenly entered the picture? The more he tried to make sense of it, the more muddled his thoughts became.

He decided to revisit the beginning. The Tehran terrorist attack had occurred just before a summit between the leaders of Iran and Russia.

"Was Ambassador Bogdanov part of the delegation?" he speculated. "Or, because he needed to stay in South Korea, was I sent as his proxy to accompany the group?"

If that were the case, it made sense why Taekjoo's name had appeared on Russia's list of individuals to rescue. But it still didn’t explain why no entry record existed for the ambassador's aide in South Korea.

"Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov..."

He turned back to the monitor and stared intently at the ambassador’s photo. He muttered the name several times, hoping it might trigger a memory. But it still felt unfamiliar, as if he were hearing it for the first time.

Out of nowhere, he rubbed his sternum with his fist. A sudden pressure in his chest had crept up on him.

"What the... Did I eat something bad?"

He pressed and massaged the area, moving his hand upward slightly to tap near his collarbone. A tightness gripped his chest as though his blood flow had been abruptly cut off, and his heart began pounding uncomfortably hard. He had no idea what was causing it. Was his stamina failing him?

Shaking off the sensation, Taekjoo forced himself to focus back on the screen, trying to decide what else to search for. His eyes drifted to the computer desktop, which was cluttered with icons for various games. As he idly scanned them, one game in particular caught his attention.

It didn’t evoke a specific memory, but there was something about it—an odd sense of familiarity.

"Did I used to play this?" he wondered, unsure.

On impulse, he clicked to launch the game. A login screen appeared, prompting him to enter an ID and password. Without thinking, as if guided by muscle memory, he began typing a string of letters that surfaced in his mind.

[Cherry Boy]

The LaFerrari Aperta crashed straight into the old wrought-iron gate, speeding ahead at full throttle. Even after the impact, the driver kept pressing the accelerator, forcing the gate open with a violent swing. One side broke off entirely, and the other barely hung from its frame, rattling in place. The car, worth billions of won, now bore a deep scratch across its body.

Yet, the driver didn't slow down, racing straight up to the front of the villa. He finally stopped after colliding with the stone railing by the steps. Guards waiting nearby quickly surrounded the car, aiming their weapons directly at the intruder.

Soon, the driver's door opened, and a man stepped out. It was Zhenya. Despite the guns trained on him, he didn't flinch. With a calm expression, he strode confidently up the steps. When the passenger door opened with a click, the guns pointed at the back of his head swiftly redirected toward the passenger side. Yoon Jongwoo, who had been trying to slip out quietly, froze.

Just then, Matías appeared outside to greet them. Dressed in a pristine white suit, he spread his arms wide to welcome Zhenya.

"Welcome, my friend. It's been too long, hasn't it?"

Even amidst the heightened tension, Matías was the only one who seemed relaxed. Zhenya brushed past him, walking into the villa without a word.

Matías's men moved to block him, but Zhenya grabbed their arms and twisted them aside with quick, efficient motions. Matías smirked at the sight.

"Quite the aggressive greeting."

Before Matías could finish his sentence, Zhenya had already disappeared from view. Moments later, sounds of shattering objects and panicked screams echoed from within the villa as Zhenya bulldozed through, knocking aside anything—or anyone—in his way, searching for something.

"Hey, Mr. Yevgeny! Wait for me!"

Yoon Jongwoo, his face as pale as a ghost, managed to force out the words. Matías watched him stagger forward, as if about to collapse, with a curious look in his eyes.

"So, your companion has changed. Your taste has taken a rather strange turn, hasn't it?"

Yoon Jongwoo awkwardly greeted Matías, who was openly eyeing him up and down. Clutching his bag tightly, his arms trembled visibly, and he didn't even dare to push his

glasses back up from where they had slipped to the tip of his nose. Matías studied him intently, then gave a warm smile.

“Welcome, my friend. Care for a drink? Or would you prefer tea? Turkish coffee is quite good, too.”

“Oh, I, um, I was... just going to... join Mr. Yevgeny…”

“You want to help that madman tear up my house?”

“No, no! I mean… I just... uh…”

“Wouldn’t it be better to relax and have refreshments while you wait with me?”

Matías’s tone was friendly, but there was an unmistakable edge to it. Jongwoo closed his mouth tightly and nodded repeatedly. Matías led him into the villa, and even as they walked, sounds of doors and furniture being ripped apart and tossed echoed around them, along with the occasional gunshot. Each shot made Jongwoo’s shoulders jolt, but Matías remained calm, as though he couldn’t hear a thing.

“This way,” Matías said, guiding Jongwoo into the lounge with a gentle push on his back. With a swift, almost invisible movement, he slid Jongwoo’s gun from his waist, leaving him no time to react. Matías handed the weapon off to one of his men and then kindly seated Jongwoo in a chair, personally pouring tea into his cup.

“I’ll just have a quick chat with Psych. You take your time here and relax.”

Pale-faced, Jongwoo nodded in silence. Matías gave him a reassuring smile and left the room. Moments later, his men positioned themselves firmly in front of Jongwoo.

Outside, Matías followed the sounds of destruction, tracking down the source. By now, Zhenya had apparently searched the entire first floor and was making his way to the second. The ceiling shook with his movements, and the sound of breaking glass was constant. Matías headed up the stairs, noticing the wreckage of shattered furniture and trinkets strewn across the landings and hallways.

In the second-floor corridor, he briefly crossed paths with Zhenya, who brushed past him, moving on to the next room. It seemed he wouldn’t rest until he had checked every last one. Even during their brief phone call, he’d sounded tense, but Matías hadn’t expected him to barge in like some kind of vengeful spirit. Was finding Taekjoo really so urgent? Seeing him like this, Matías couldn’t help but wonder if Taekjoo held Zhenya’s very lifeline in his hands.

“Hey, friend. Is this any way to behave?” Matías tried to get Zhenya’s attention. But Zhenya ignored him entirely, as if he hadn’t heard him at all, storming into the room where Kwon Taekjoo had been staying. The guards moved to intercept him again, but Matías shook his head, waving them off before following Zhenya inside.

Zhenya stood motionless in the center of the room, his brow furrowed. The room was filled with the lingering scent of burning candles, which only seemed to agitate him more. After a

moment, he abruptly walked over to the bed, yanking the pillows and blanket toward him, pressing his face into them to catch any remaining trace. Still unsatisfied, he examined the sheets and the surrounding area with meticulous care.

Furniture toppled as Zhenya's hands swept roughly across the tables, chairs, and nightstand, leaving the room in disarray. Even the carpet beneath the bed was half-torn and flipped over. When he found nothing, he moved into the adjoining bathroom, rifling through everything there as well. Matías, watching from the door with his arms crossed, finally knocked lightly.

A sharp, intense glare shot toward him, like a blade.

"You really think it's fine to trash someone else's place like this?" Matías put on an expression of mock indignation. Zhenya finally took a moment to catch his breath, pushing his disheveled hair back as he turned slowly to face Matías. The air between them tightened, his gaze unwavering, almost as if questioning whether Matías was truly as clueless as he seemed.

"What is it? Seriously, what are you looking for?" Matías asked.

"I hear you've been keeping an Asian around lately."

"Oh, word gets around fast in this place. Or wait—could it be that I'm gaining popularity? I didn't even know you were here until I heard from you." Matías gave a wry smile.

"Stop stalling. I'm not asking twice."

"Right, right. An Asian, you said? Hmm. Was one of those Asian women? Can't recall much—after all, drugs make for a hazy memory," Matías muttered absently, scratching his neck.

Zhenya's expression grew even colder, his stance tensed as if ready to snap Matías's neck the moment he let his guard down. But Matías only responded with a smug grin.

"Why does this Asian have to be a particular 'someone'?"

"Where is he? The Asian."

"I told you, I have no idea who you're talking about. If you'd just explain what's going on, who you're looking for, and why, maybe I could help you out."

"You don't know?"

"That's right."

"Then you'll have to take responsibility for that answer."

The words sounded like a declaration of war, and Matías let out a brief laugh.

“What responsibility, exactly? You storm in here demanding things,” he chuckled as if singing a tune, tilting his head theatrically to the side and shrugging. A vein pulsed on Zhenya’s forehead as he watched, his pupils contracting in anger. He looked ready to tear Matías apart.

Then—

“Mr. Yevgeny!” came Yoon Jongwoo’s frantic voice from downstairs. Both Zhenya and Matías turned toward the door as Yoon Jongwoo came rushing up the stairs.

“Look at this!” Yoon Jongwoo was so out of breath he just thrust his phone out. Matías watched him with curiosity, but Jongwoo quickly turned the screen toward Zhenya, guarding it from Matías’s view. A notification was open, but it was all in Korean, making it hard to understand. Yoon Jongwoo whispered so that only Zhenya could hear.

“It’s a notification from my game account. I haven’t logged in in ages.”

“So?”

“So someone just logged into my account from an unknown device and IP address. I even got a verification message. My Sunbae once tried to contact me through this account.”

“Can you trace the login location?”

“Yes. For now, it’s showing a Russian IP, but that could be a diversion. I’ll have to look further to get the exact location.”

“Do it in under ten minutes.”

With that abrupt order, Zhenya strode off somewhere. Yoon Jongwoo quickly followed after him, calling, **“Wait for me!”**

“What? Leaving without even having a drink?” Matías called out. Zhenya didn’t bother to reply or say goodbye. He climbed into his car, engine still running, and Yoon Jongwoo hastily jumped into the passenger seat, fearing he’d be left behind. The car spun in a wide arc, reversed, then sped off, leaving the villa.

After bursting in and now leaving just as suddenly. Matías laughed in disbelief. His guards moved to fire after the retreating car, but he held up a hand to stop them. If Zhenya was so intent on finding Kwon Taekjoo, he’d end up back here eventually.

Just as he was about to turn away with that reassurance, his secretary hurried up to him, looking uneasy.

“What is it?” Matías asked warily.

The news was unexpected.

“The target has vanished, sir.”

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Chapter End Notes

Support the author by purchasing the novel on Ridibooks.

So Close Yet So Far

Chapter Notes

⚠️ This chapter contains depictions of sexual assault.

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The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED
•PERSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN ***BOLD ITALICS***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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The LaFerrari screeched to a halt in the heart of the old city. Zhenya and Yoon Jongwoo abandoned the car without a second thought, sprinting into the maze of alleyways.

Bursting into an internet café marked on their map, they were immediately approached by the owner, who tried to say something to them. Ignoring him completely, they scanned the room, inspecting every single user seated at their stations.

They yanked collars without warning, pulling people around to check their faces. If they weren't convinced, they even pinched skin to confirm identities. Frustrated complaints erupted from all corners of the café.

There was no sign of Taekjoo anywhere. Had they come up empty-handed again?

"Are you sure this is the place?"

"Yes, it's definitely here..."

Yoon Jongwoo stared at his phone with a troubled expression. The only person who could have accessed his old gaming account was Taekjoo. Jongwoo had long stopped playing the game, and the dwindling player base had left the servers on the brink of shutting down. If Taekjoo's memory was stuck in the past, he wouldn't know about any of this. Jongwoo thought it possible that Taekjoo might have used the account to reach out—after all, he had

done something similar in the past when things had gone sideways in Russia, landing him on the organization's wanted list.

Was it just wishful thinking?

"I'm sorry," Jongwoo apologized, sounding defeated.

Zhenya, who had been silently watching him with a dissatisfied look, suddenly noticed something. Carefully, almost delicately, he plucked something off Jongwoo's shoulder—a strand of hair. It was dark, slightly wavy, and thick.

"Why does a guy's hair look so silky? It's annoyingly perfect"

"Taekjoo, you like it, don't you?"

"Who said I like it?"

Despite grumbling, Kwon Taekjoo often played with Zhenya's hair whenever the opportunity arose. Whether Zhenya fell asleep early or woke up late, Taekjoo would quietly run his fingers through the strands, only to feign indifference as soon as Zhenya stirred.

In return, Zhenya often pulled Taekjoo into a rough embrace, pressing his face into his hair. The soft, slightly wavy texture reminded him of a cozy blanket, and he couldn't resist indulging in the sensation.

The strand of hair he had pulled off Jongwoo was strikingly similar to Taekjoo's. Unless Jongwoo had been walking around with it stuck to him all this time—something Zhenya highly doubted—or Zhenya had somehow failed to notice it until now, the most likely explanation was that it had transferred from Taekjoo back at Matías's villa.

"Taekjoo... It's him, no doubt," Zhenya murmured.

"Him?" Jongwoo blinked, confused. **"What do you mean?"**

Zhenya, without offering Yoon Jongwoo any explanation, kept fiddling with the strand of hair in his hand. Without hesitation, he brought it close to his nose and sniffed it, but it wasn't enough to detect Taekjoo's familiar scent.

"Hey, you two! What do you think you're doing in my shop?"

The owner of the internet café had finally had enough, storming over and pointing accusingly at them. It wasn't unreasonable—two strangers had barged in, stirred up the place without paying, and caused a commotion.

"If you don't leave right now, I'm calling the police!"

Zhenya moved before the man could act, grabbing him by the collar and lifting him off the ground in one swift motion. The man's legs dangled in midair as he froze, instinctively paralyzed by fear. Zhenya shoved a photo of Taekjoo in his face. The café owner stared at the

image on the phone, then nodded several times in rapid succession. Without a word, he gestured toward a secluded spot in the café.

Jongwoo hurried over to the indicated seat and politely asked the current user to move. Once the computer was free, he quickly began reviewing its usage history.

"The browsing history was deleted an hour ago! That's totally his habit!" Jongwoo exclaimed with certainty.

It was clear that Taekjoo had been here about an hour ago. But after that? Had he returned to Matías's villa? If Taekjoo was truly working closely with Matías, there would have been no reason for him to come here to use the internet.

The fact that he had gone out of his way to act independently suggested that he didn't fully trust Matías. It also hinted that Taekjoo might not be planning to return to him at all.

An hour was plenty of time for Taekjoo to disappear without a trace. If they didn't catch up to him soon, he'd vanish again.

"Taekjoo!"

As he stepped out of the car, Matías came striding toward him. His sudden appearance felt almost too eager, like someone who had been anxiously waiting.

Despite the smile on his face, there was more relief than joy in his expression. Taekjoo noticed it immediately and scrutinized Matías, his gaze sharp and questioning. Why had Matías gone out of his way to greet him so enthusiastically?

"What's all this fuss about?" Taekjoo asked, folding his arms with a bemused expression.

"How could I not make a fuss? What happened? You suddenly disappeared—you scared the hell out of me," Matías shot back, his tone dripping with exasperation.

Taekjoo couldn't help but feel that Matías was being unnecessarily dramatic. After all, he wasn't a child, and Matías certainly wasn't his guardian. Seizing the moment, Taekjoo decided to push back.

"Right. And who gave you permission to tail me?"

"Tailing you? I was trying to keep you safe, in case you got into trouble," Matías replied, his tone unashamed.

As expected, Matías was being his usual brazen self. There was no point in arguing further; it would never lead to a productive conversation. With a shrug, Taekjoo dismissed the matter casually.

"I just wanted to spend some time alone."

"Where were you?" Matías pressed, his eyes narrowing.

"You don’t need to know that."

"That’s a bit hurtful. Do you have any idea how worried I was, thinking you might’ve been taken by some shady people?"

"Oh, really? How touching," Taekjoo replied with a smirk, brushing past Matías as he entered the villa.

Matías, not one to give up easily, followed him, firing off more questions.

"Are you seriously not going to tell me where you were?"

"I was just looking around. The market had some interesting stuff," Taekjoo said, waving a plastic bag he held in his hand.

The bag was full of items wrapped in red plastic—instant ramen and other Korean groceries.

"What on earth did you buy? Have you even eaten yet?"

"This *is* my meal. From now on, I’ll take care of my own food, so don’t worry about it. Right now, I just want to wash up and rest."

Taekjoo turned to head upstairs but suddenly stopped mid-step. **"Oh,"** he muttered, as if remembering something.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small envelope and handed it to Matías without explanation.

"What’s this?" Matías asked, taking the envelope.

"My passport photo. Didn’t you ask me to get one taken?"

Matías opened the envelope and pulled out the photo. Even for a passport picture, Taekjoo's expression was unusually blank. His gaze was sharp, almost as if he were challenging the camera to a staring contest. Matías couldn’t help but chuckle at the oddly combative tone of the photo.

"Looks great," he said, amused.

"Does it?" Taekjoo replied flatly.

As he turned to leave, he paused mid-step and glanced back. Matías raised an eyebrow as if expecting another comment. "Drink?" Matías asked casually, holding up a glass.

Taekjoo shook his head and instead gestured toward the door. **"Did someone come by while I was gone?"**

"...What brings that up?" Matías asked after a brief hesitation.

"The front gate looks like it’s been hit by something. It’s all bent out of shape."

"Oh, that," Matías replied with a dismissive wave. **"Just a passing car. The driver was a beginner—nothing serious."**

Taekjoo nodded slowly, as though convinced, and then headed upstairs.

As he walked down the second-floor hallway, something felt off. The windows seemed different, as if they had been replaced recently. Some of the decorative items that had been scattered along the corridor were missing too. A faint sense of unease crept in.

When Taekjoo stepped into his room, he stopped just inside the doorway and let his eyes sweep across the space. The smell of a candle, one he'd intentionally blown out earlier because of a headache, was overwhelming. The table, the lamps, even the bedding—they were all rearranged, noticeably different from when he'd last left the room.

Granted, in a villa this size, it wasn't unusual for staff to come in and clean. But what puzzled him was why anyone would feel the need to reorganize a room he'd already left in perfect order.

Even the carpet had been replaced. Kneeling down, Taekjoo ran his hands over the new material, even flipping up sections to check underneath. Was it paranoia, or could someone have installed a listening device?

After a thorough search, he found nothing out of the ordinary. But the unsettling feeling lingered.

"…"

After a moment of contemplation, Taekjoo glanced out into the hallway. As usual, Matías's bodyguards stood on alert, stationed at strategic points. Motion-detecting CCTV cameras dotted the property, silently monitoring every angle. Closing the door behind him, Taekjoo moved to the window to survey the exterior. Four guards were posted at the entrance, and CCTV units were mounted along the villa's outer walls.

Each room in the villa had its own bathroom. With drainage pipes running through the wooden ceilings, Taekjoo concluded the safest route to move undetected past the guards and cameras was through there.

Once resolved, he stepped into the bathroom and climbed onto the edge of the tub. Carefully lifting the ceiling panel of the inspection hatch, he spotted the straight stretch of drainage pipes. Holding a small emergency flashlight between his teeth, he hoisted himself up into the narrow crawlspace. As expected, the pipes connected from one bathroom to another, but the passage was so cramped that he had to flatten himself completely to crawl through. He moved quietly, inching forward and counting the rooms he passed.

After reaching the fifth bathroom, he stopped. He lifted the inspection panel slightly and peered into the room below. Nothing stirred. Satisfied, he slid down silently and scanned the surroundings. The room was empty. Thick curtains hung over the windows, blocking visibility from the outside. It was unlikely anyone would notice an intruder.

The room Taekjoo had slipped into was Matías's study. He'd previously confirmed there were no CCTVs inside. No matter how paranoid Matías was about external threats, it made sense that he wouldn't install surveillance in a space where he spent so much time. People with skeletons in their closets rarely liked their every move documented.

Moving confidently, Taekjoo approached the desk and slid his hand beneath one of the drawers, retrieving an item hidden there. It was the phone Matías had given him.

He pocketed the device, tape and all, and retraced his route through the crawlspace, eventually making it back to his own room. Crawling through the dusty ceiling left him disheveled and filthy. Without hesitation, he plugged the phone into a charger and headed straight for the shower.

Curiosity gnawed at him. What recordings might the phone hold? Fresh out of the shower, he barely toweled off, throwing on a robe and hurrying back to the phone.

The battery was at a meager 20%, but he couldn't wait any longer. He powered it on, relieved to find several saved audio files. Plugging in a pair of wired earphones, he started playing the recordings.

At first, faint noises trickled in—barely perceptible. He cranked up the volume, and chaotic sounds came into focus: crashing, shattering, things being thrown and broken. Then came sharper, more visceral noises—the twisting of bones and agonized screams that tore through his ears.

The sound of shattering glass made his hair stand on end, and his thoughts flashed back to the suspiciously replaced windows, the tidied hallway, and the altered state of his room. It all started to make a grim kind of sense.

What had happened? Taekjoo leaned in closer, focusing on the audio file. The distant crashing sounds grew louder, escalating quickly until they felt as though they were right in front of him. It was as if the intruder had made it all the way to Matías's study, where the recording device had been hidden. The sound of a door being roughly thrown open followed.

The intensity of the moment gripped Taekjoo, his heartbeat quickening as if he were the one hiding in the study. Without realizing it, he held his breath, straining to pick up every noise coming through the earphones. The intruder's heavy breathing filled the recording, accompanied by the sounds of frantic rummaging. They searched every corner—the bookshelf, the display cabinet, the bathroom, even behind the chairs—without hesitation, as if dealing with a drug lord's armed successor was a trivial matter. Were they with the police?

The intruder never spoke, their presence marked only by the relentless sound of their labored breaths. It reminded Taekjoo of a hunting dog, panting furiously after chasing prey for miles. A chill ran down his spine, and an unshakable anxiety crept in, though he couldn't explain why. Could he know this person?

Failing to find what they sought in the study, the intruder moved out of the room. A few minutes later, Matías's voice could be heard.

“Hey, friend. Is this any way to behave?”

There was no response. The intruder opened the door to another room, and Matías followed, his tone growing more exasperated.

“You really think it’s fine to trash someone else’s place like this?”

The destruction continued, the intruder smashing their way through the villa without uttering a word. By then, Taekjoo’s curiosity was fully piqued. Who was this person? What were they doing here? And, more importantly, what were they searching for?

“What is it? Seriously, what are you looking for?”

Matías demanded, his irritation evident.

“I hear you’ve been keeping an Asian around lately.”

The intruder’s voice broke through the recording suddenly. Taekjoo’s heart plummeted. A wave of confusion and unease washed over him, leaving him frozen, his breath caught in his throat. *What? Why?* The questions swirled in his mind.

The voice was eerie—neither loud nor soft, but weighted with a cold, sinister energy. It was slow, slightly wavering, as though it could shift to something even darker at any moment. It had a unique timbre, the kind of voice that, once heard, would linger in memory indefinitely.

Taekjoo strained to listen more closely, desperate to catch every detail. But his thundering heartbeat drowned out the finer sounds. Just as he reached for the playback bar to rewind and relisten, a sudden realization stopped him.

A knock sounded at the door. Taekjoo startled, quickly pulling out his earphones. **"Taekjoo,"** came Matías's voice from the hallway. Tossing his robe over the phone to hide it, he strode to the door. He had been so absorbed in the recording that he hadn’t noticed anyone approaching or calling for him. When he opened the door, Matías stood there with a puzzled expression.

"What’s going on?" Taekjoo asked.

"I should be asking you that. I’ve been calling your name, but you didn’t respond."

"Ah, I was in the shower," Taekjoo replied smoothly, keeping his tone casual. Matías’s gaze slid down from Taekjoo’s damp hair, tracing its way lower. When Matías’s eyes lingered around his waist, Taekjoo rapped the doorframe with his knuckles to redirect his attention.

"So, what do you want?" he pressed.

"Ah… nothing serious. I was getting restless just sitting around recovering, so I called for a massage therapist. They’ll be setting up a hammam session. Want to join me?"

A hammam, Matías explained, referred to a traditional Turkish bathhouse. The experience included a combination of baths, saunas, scrubs, foam massages, and full-body treatments, all

in a single, indulgent session.

"Trust me, it'll melt away all your fatigue," Matías said with a persuasive grin.

The suggestion sounded far more decadent than Taekjoo expected. He wasn't exactly thrilled, but there wasn't a compelling reason to decline. After all, the guards wouldn't accompany them into a bathhouse, and Matías himself would likely lower his guard there. It could provide the perfect opportunity to extract the answers Taekjoo needed.

"Go on ahead," Taekjoo said. **"I'll get ready and join you."**

"You look ready enough to me," Matías teased.

"Give me ten minutes."

"Fine. I'll see you downstairs in the basement."

Matías turned and headed down to the first floor. Taekjoo watched him leave before closing the door. Returning to the sofa, he pulled the phone out from under the robe, plugged in the earphones, and hit play again.

The recording resumed with a voice laced with sarcasm:
"Oh, word gets around fast in this place. Or wait—could it be that I'm gaining popularity? I didn't even know you were here until I heard from you."

"Stop stalling. I'm not asking twice."

The tone was sharp, cutting through the recording with a chilling finality.

"Right, right. An Asian, you said? Hmm. Was one of those Asian women? Can't recall much—after all, drugs make for a hazy memory."

It was becoming clear that the Asian person the intruder was searching for was none other than Taekjoo. Yet Matías played dumb, acting as if he had no idea. Taekjoo couldn't tell if Matías was trying to protect him or keep something from the stranger.

"Why does this Asian have to be a particular 'someone'?" Matías asked.

"Where is he? The Asian" the intruder demanded.

"I told you, I have no idea who you're talking about. If you'd just explain what's going on, who you're looking for, and why, maybe I could help you out."

"You don't know?"

"That's right."

"Then you'll have to take responsibility for that answer."

"What responsibility, exactly? You storm in here demanding things."

The more Taekjoo listened to the intruder's voice, the more a strange familiarity settled over him. Where had he heard it before? The man spoke fluent English, but his words carried the unmistakable undertone of a Russian accent. Was he Russian? And why, of all people, was he after Taekjoo? Questions spiraled endlessly in his mind.

A brief silence followed, and then another voice cut in.

"Mr. Yevgeny!"

"…What?"

The name startled Taekjoo. Of all the things to hear, this was the most unexpected. It was a name he had been turning over in his mind all day. Yevgeny. Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov. The image of the handsome Russian ambassador to South Korea that he had seen in search results earlier flashed vividly before him.

The voice, which had felt oddly familiar yet alien, suddenly clicked into place. It was unmistakably his. The idea that the voice and that face belonged to two different people seemed utterly inconceivable.

The Russian ambassador to South Korea was personally searching for an Asian individual. No, Taekjoo was now certain—it was him the man was after. But why? What reason could possibly justify the ambassador coming in person? Was it because Taekjoo, a subordinate once considered disposable, had gone missing and then resurfaced? Or was there something deeper at play? Did Taekjoo know one of the ambassador's secrets? Or perhaps he had unwittingly taken possession of something important to the man?

"So, this is your little burrow?" The voice dripped with disdain. "You should've dug deeper—far enough that no one could reach you."

A sudden flash of memory struck Taekjoo like a lightning bolt. Lately, these flashes had been coming more frequently, fleeting glimpses of something buried in the recesses of his mind. But this time, it was different. The fragmented images were accompanied by a voice.

"Why? Ready to give up already? You didn't go through all this trouble just to crumble now, did you?"

In the memory, Taekjoo saw himself sprawled helplessly on the floor, utterly powerless. His tormentor showed no mercy, grinding him down as if it didn't matter whether he lived or died.

"Spying wasn't enough for you, huh? You had to add breaking and entering, assault, terrorism, theft, impersonating an official, and property damage to your resume? You've been busy."

The mocking laughter was as vivid as if it were happening now, carrying the oppressive weight of the fear and hopelessness that had consumed him back then.

"None of that matters, though. What did I tell you? I made myself very clear, didn't I? All you had to do was stay away from what's mine. How hard could that be?"

The sheer arrogance in the voice, its venomous tone, and the slight twist in its accent—Taekjoo was sure he knew exactly who it belonged to.

"You better start thinking hard about how you're going to stay alive from now on."

"Ah… no…"

A siren blared in his head, a mental alarm flashing violently. It felt as though a sharp, unrelenting spike was tearing through his brainstem. He grabbed at his throbbing head, his entire body convulsing in agony. Even clenching his teeth couldn't suppress the groans escaping his lips. In moments, he was drenched in sweat.

"Ugh… damn it…!"

Wracked with pain, he hurled his phone across the room. Even after that, the pounding headache refused to subside, leaving him groaning in frustration. The echo of mocking laughter reverberated endlessly in his ears.

"Hah… hah…"

Just as he was about to lose consciousness, the torment finally eased. The memories of his past, and the searing pain they dragged along, always came without warning and disappeared just as abruptly. The lack of control over this process filled him with irritation. Running his hands through his hair, he ruffled it in agitation.

Once he calmed down a bit, he tried to collect his thoughts. Amid the haze of uncertainty, one thing seemed clear: Kwon Taekjoo and the Russian ambassador were unlikely to have had a cordial relationship. To Mathias or his mother, Taekjoo might have appeared as the ambassador's loyal subordinate, but the truth hinted at something far more insidious. There was a strong possibility that he had been a spy.

That would explain why his resurfacing memories involved terms like "spy" and "betrayal." The instinctive fear that flared up whenever he heard the ambassador's voice or saw his face was likely a reflection of deeply ingrained dread.

Taekjoo himself had approached the ambassador as a spy. Eventually, his cover must have been blown, and he fled with something damaging enough to deal a severe blow to the ambassador or his family. If this theory were true, it explained why the Russian government or Yevgeny himself was so desperate to track him down.

Of course, all of this was pure conjecture based on intuition. Clearer evidence was needed to confirm the facts. Some answers might be found by questioning Mathias. With that in mind, Taekjoo slipped on his robe and left the room.

Descending to the villa's basement, he was greeted by the sight of a lavish glass door. The guard stationed there opened it for him without a word. As expected, there were no other

security personnel in sight.

The moment he stepped into the hammam, he was enveloped by a wave of intense heat and humidity. Except for the cedar sauna, the space was dominated by marble, its cool sheen contrasting sharply with the stifling air. Clicking his tongue, he walked toward the sound of water.

Mathias, already soaking in the bath, raised a leisurely hand in greeting.

“Hey, you made it. Want a drink?”

“I’ll pass. The last thing I need is to get drunk and make a fool of myself.”

“Suit yourself.”

Mathias set down his glass and stepped out of the bath. Gesturing toward the marble beds nearby, he gave Taekjoo a knowing look. He climbed onto one, demonstrating what he meant.

Though it didn’t appeal to him at first, Taekjoo shed his robe and took the spot beside Mathias.

“You’ll enjoy it.”

Mathias grinned and rang a small bell that had been placed nearby. Shortly after, two masseurs entered the room. Thankfully, the atmosphere wasn’t as decadent as Taekjoo had feared.

The masseurs greeted them silently before scooping warm water from the bath and pouring it over their backs. The sensation was akin to a hot shower. The marble bed, heated to a comfortable temperature, quickly eased the tension in Taekjoo’s body. He’d been missing the warmth of a Korean *ondol* floor, and this setup, though not quite the same, provided a small measure of comfort.

Not long after, a thick layer of foam was spread across their bodies. The masseurs used thin cloths, puffed up like balloons, to gently scrub the foam over their skin. The tickling sensation wasn’t particularly satisfying, but since it was part of the process, Taekjoo endured it in silence. Mathias, on the other hand, let out a low, contented sigh, clearly enjoying the experience.

Taekjoo debated when would be the right moment to bring up his questions. Before he could decide, Mathias spoke first.

“How about we leave here tomorrow?”

“Out of the blue?”

Taekjoo turned to Mathias in surprise, but Mathias simply nodded calmly.

“Yeah. Something’s come up, and I think I need to return home in a hurry. You can come with me to Mexico first, and from there, head back to Korea. In Mexico, you’ll have the freedom to do whatever you need. It’ll also be much easier to disguise your identity there.”

“Hm…”

Why was Mathias, who had been so composed until now, suddenly rushing to return home? Was it because of the Russian ambassador who had barged in earlier? Was Mathias trying to protect Taekjoo from him? And if so, what did Mathias hope to gain in return? Could it be leverage over the Russian ambassador—some weakness Taekjoo had supposedly stolen?

His thoughts raced as Mathias broke in again.

“Well? What do you think?”

“I… don’t mind,” Taekjoo replied cautiously.

"Perfect. Let’s leave early tomorrow morning," Mathias said with a satisfied grin, raising his hand.

At his signal, the masseurs poured warm water over them, washing away the soft foam that had clung to their skin. The soothing sensation left them feeling refreshed.

"Ready for the massage?" Mathias asked.

The masseurs draped towels over their damp bodies. Mathias used his to dry himself off before wrapping it around his waist to cover the essentials. Taekjoo followed his lead, and they moved to the massage room.

The massage room was dimly lit, darker than the other areas. The subdued lighting was clearly intended to enhance the relaxing atmosphere. As they lay face-down on the leather massage beds, the masseurs re-entered and lit scented candles. The fragrance quickly filled the room, and Taekjoo felt his body grow heavy with a languid drowsiness.

What was it he had meant to ask Mathias? He tried to sift through the haze clouding his thoughts, but his mind became slower and duller until his eyelids finally slid shut.

After missions, the sauna was always his first stop—a sweet reward for his worn-out body. The enveloping warmth would dissolve every ounce of tension, offering a sense of relief and accomplishment. The heat soaked into his muscles, loosening his nerves. After sweating out the exhaustion and taking a refreshing shower, he’d collapse onto his bed and sleep for days on end, dreamlessly and deeply.

As usual, he sank into a heavy sleep. But at some point, a shadow loomed over him. It wasn’t a figment of his imagination; a large body settled on top of his own, pressing down with a weight that was at once firm and soft. The sudden pressure, coupled with the familiar scent enveloping him, left no doubt about who it was. Even the sensation of hair brushing teasingly against his neck and shoulders confirmed it.

Taekjoo tried to open his eyes, but his body wouldn't respond. All he could manage was a muffled groan beneath the other's weight.

The intruder buried their face against the back of Taekjoo's neck, his shoulders, and his nape, leaving lingering kisses wherever they pleased. Whenever Taekjoo seemed to drift back into sleep, the other would bite or tug lightly at his skin, pulling him back to wakefulness with deliberate playfulness.

"...Taekjoo," came the low murmur of his name, sending a long sigh escaping from his lips. Reaching behind him, he ran his fingers through the other's hair in a quiet, familiar gesture.

For all the liberties they'd taken moments ago, the other now stilled, leaning their cheek into Taekjoo's hand like a loyal dog seeking its master's affection.

"...geny."

"Hm?"

A soft moan escaped his lips before the sound startled him awake. His vision swam, blurry and unfocused. Whether it was a dream or a hallucination, he couldn't tell—but the weight pressing him down was real. Someone was still on top of him.

As he tried to turn his head to the side, a hand grabbed his chin, forcing him to look straight ahead. Before he could react, lips pressed against his own. He clenched his teeth tightly, resisting whatever liquid the other was trying to pour into his mouth. Most of it spilled down his chin instead.

The figure let out a disappointed sigh before dragging their tongue over Taekjoo's lips, wet with the spilled liquid.

For some reason, his mind felt blank, the haze in his head refusing to lift. With a surge of effort, he shoved the other person off him and shook his head vigorously in an attempt to clear his thoughts. Pain pulsed through his skull, making his ears ring.

"…What the hell?" he growled.

"Oh, you're awake?"

Mathias's voice was cheerful, accompanied by a lazy grin. His eyes, slightly unfocused, hinted at whatever drug he'd indulged in this time.

Taekjoo's gaze darted around the room. They were still in the massage room, but something was off. The once-soothing scent of candles had become cloyingly overwhelming, almost nauseating. The masseurs were nowhere to be seen, and the lighting had taken on an unsettling reddish hue.

He couldn't even remember when or how he had fallen asleep.

Matías, noticing Kwon Taekjoo's confusion, began to kiss his ear and neck gently. He also insistently rubbed his crotch against Kwon Taekjoo's own. Matías' erect cock rubbed and

pushed hurriedly against Kwon Taekjoo's.

“What the hell are you doing? Get off me,” Taekjoo snapped, his voice laced with fury.

Mathias, undeterred, leaned closer, his breath hot against Taekjoo’s ear. **“Taekjoo,”** he murmured, his tone as smooth as silk, **“have you ever thought about working as my personal bodyguard? I’ll treat you well. The pay will be more than fair.”**

As he spoke, Mathias’s lips closed around Taekjoo’s earlobe, his tongue pressing insistently into the curve of his ear. His hands roamed freely, gripping Taekjoo’s chest and ass with a firm, almost possessive touch.

The sound of Mathias’s increasingly ragged breathing filled the air, making Taekjoo’s stomach churn with revulsion.

“... Ugh…”

With heavy arms, Taekjoo hugged Matias' neck. Then, Matías smiled seductively and asked.

“Do you like it here?”

Meanwhile, he began to thrust his cock between Taekjoo's pressed thighs, moving it restlessly and moaning in pleasure. Matías' testicles and perineum were constantly in contact with Taekjoo's body, and his cock rubbed gently against the hole at the rear. Taekjoo gritted his teeth hard.

Taekjoo tightened his arms around Mathias, locking him in place. Then, with a sudden shift, he rolled their entwined bodies off the massage bed and onto the floor. The crash was loud, and Mathias yelped in exaggerated pain.

“Ah, damn! That hurt!” he whined.

But his theatrics stopped the moment Taekjoo climbed on top of him, pinning him down with a knee pressed firmly against his throat. Mathias’s eyes widened, his instincts kicking in as he reached for the gun that had fallen nearby during their scuffle.

Just as his fingers brushed the weapon, Taekjoo’s fist drove hard into Mathias’s solar plexus. The blow forced a guttural sound from him, his body jerking upward in reflex. The force was enough to make one think a rib might have cracked.

“Don’t even think about pulling that crap again,” Taekjoo warned coldly, pressing his fist against Mathias’s chest, right over his heart.

The heat in Mathias’s gaze dissipated in an instant. Despite all his earlier provocations, the complete lack of response from Taekjoo’s body made his efforts feel meaningless. A bitter laugh escaped him, and he raised his hands in mock surrender.

“Alright, alright. My bad. I apologize for being rude. Can’t blame a guy for getting carried away, though. Who could pass up such tempting fruit?”

“Shut up and answer my questions,” Taekjoo shot back, pressing his knee harder against Mathias’s throat.

Even with his face turning crimson and veins bulging on his forehead from the pressure, Mathias still managed a grin. **“Alright, alright. What are you so curious about?”**

“The Russian ambassador was here today, wasn’t he?”

“Huh?” Mathias blinked, feigning surprise. **“How’d you figure that out? Spying on me now, are you?”**

“If you can do it, so can I.”

Mathias chuckled dryly, then nodded. **“Yeah, he was here. He came to get you.”**

So, it was true. The Russian ambassador was after him. Taekjoo’s suspicions about betraying the ambassador and fleeing grew stronger. But how did Mathias fit into all of this?

Still kneeling over him, Taekjoo stared down at Mathias, his mind racing with questions he couldn’t answer on his own. Finally, he threw one of them out, needing clarity.

“What’s the connection between that guy and ‘Psych’?”

“Oh, you don’t already know?” Mathias teased, a sly grin tugging at his lips.

“Cut the crap and answer the question.”

“Alright, alright! I’ll cooperate, but can you ease up a bit? You’re about to crush my throat here.”

Mathias tapped at Taekjoo’s leg, which was pressed against his neck with bone-breaking intensity. Even on the brink of suffocation, he couldn’t help but crack a joke. Taekjoo eased the pressure just slightly, allowing Mathias to take a long, raspy breath before finally spilling what he knew.

“Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov—that’s Psych.”

“What?”

Taekjoo’s mind reeled. Yevgeny, the third son of the influential Bogdanov family and a high-ranking diplomat, was Psych? Suddenly, Mathias’s earlier claim that Psych had ties to the Russian mafia and government officials came rushing back. If it was all true, then the fragmented pieces of Taekjoo’s memory were starting to fall into place, albeit shakily.

But another question gnawed at him. Mathias seemed to know Psych far better than Taekjoo did, so why hadn’t he handed him over? Was he trying to use Taekjoo to gain leverage over Psych, exploiting some weakness he might hold?

“Are you trying to hide me or keep me hidden for yourself?” Taekjoo demanded.

Mathias stretched the silence, dragging out his answer. **“Good question.”**

The vague reply earned him another sharp press of Taekjoo’s knee.

“Answer me.”

“At first, I thought about hiding you,” Mathias admitted between coughs, the ever-present smirk never leaving his face. **“Now, I’m leaning toward keeping you.”**

Taekjoo narrowed his eyes, unsure what to make of the cryptic response. Mathias raised a hand, brushing it lightly against Taekjoo’s thigh in a way that made his skin crawl. Even with his life on the line, Mathias couldn’t help himself.

Without a word, Taekjoo reached over and grabbed Mathias’s fallen gun. Leveling the barrel at his target, he ordered coldly, **“Get up.”**

Mathias complied, raising his hands as he stood. Taekjoo tossed him a robe, and Mathias slipped it on without complaint. But as soon as he had it on, he grabbed a nearby towel, moving toward Taekjoo with a casual air that belied the tense atmosphere.

The gun pressed against Mathias’s forehead, halting him in his tracks.

"What are you doing?"

"It's not very gentlemanly to walk around so carelessly, you know," Mathias quipped, wrapping a towel snugly around Taekjoo's waist. Even with the barrel of a gun pressed firmly against his head, he managed to smile, radiating an infuriating calm.

"Get out."

Taekjoo shoved Mathias toward the door, the gun aimed steadily at the back of his head. Mathias opened the door slowly, stepping into the hallway. A waiting bodyguard immediately raised his rifle, the urgency in his movements palpable.

"Drop the gun and step back!" the guard barked.

Mathias turned his head slightly and nodded as if signaling the guard to follow the order. Reluctantly, the bodyguard lowered his weapon and stepped back, his confusion evident. Taekjoo used his foot to kick the rifle out of reach before continuing forward, keeping Mathias in front of him.

They climbed the staircase together, Taekjoo still holding the gun on Mathias, until they reached the second floor. The moment they entered, more bodyguards surrounded them, their weapons trained on Taekjoo. The air was thick with tension, dozens of barrels poised to fire.

"Whoa, whoa, back off! Everyone, step away," Mathias said, waving his hands with exaggerated cheer. "No need for anyone to get hurt. Move aside, all of you. Come on, give us some space."

At Mathias's command, the bodyguards hesitated, exchanging bewildered glances before parting reluctantly. Taekjoo marched Mathias toward a study on the second floor. Reaching the door, Taekjoo shoved him forward, and Mathias, unbothered, opened it with ease, stepping inside. Taekjoo followed, locking the door securely behind them.

Maybe it was the drugs still clouding his senses, or maybe it was just his nature, but Mathias appeared delighted, chuckling softly to himself as if this were all some amusing game.

"So, what's the plan now, Taekjoo?" Mathias asked, his voice teasing.

"Make a call."

"To whom?" Mathias tilted his head, feigning innocence.

"Call Psych."

Mathias's eyes widened in surprise. He tilted his head slightly, scratching his eyebrow in hesitation.

"Doesn't seem like a great idea."

"I'll be the judge of that. Make the call."

Taekjoo pressed the muzzle of the gun against Mathias's forehead. Sighing dramatically, Mathias pouted, pulled out his phone, and followed the command. Switching to speaker mode, he placed the phone on the desk. The screen displayed the name "Psych" in Spanish.

A long, slow dial tone began to echo through the room. Taekjoo held his breath, waiting for the call to connect. For some reason, his heart was pounding, thundering so loud it drowned out everything else.

"They're not picking up," Mathias said, shrugging.

The call went unanswered. Taekjoo frowned. It wasn't that late—why wouldn't they answer? Just as he reached for the phone to try again, a familiar, thunderous noise filled the air.

It was the sound of helicopter rotors.

Both Taekjoo and Mathias turned their gaze toward the window. Sure enough, in the dark night sky, a bright light moved rapidly toward the estate. A helicopter.

Outside, the bodyguards standing watch began firing blindly into the sky. The helicopter retaliated, a deafening roar as its minigun unleashed a torrent of bullets, closing the distance swiftly.

Through the chaos, a figure became visible inside the aircraft: Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov—**Psych.**

"What the hell..." Taekjoo muttered under his breath.

"Get down!" Mathias shouted.

The helicopter's minigun erupted again, and Taekjoo and Mathias dived behind the desk for cover. Despite its reinforced glass, the window couldn't withstand the barrage for long. It shattered into a thousand shards, raining down like deadly confetti.

Propeller wind roared through the broken window, whipping glass, curtains, and furniture around the room in a chaotic storm. Taekjoo couldn't even open his eyes against the onslaught.

"Taekjoo!"

The deafening wind made Taekjoo's ears ring, but amidst the chaos, a familiar voice reached him. He froze instinctively, his body going rigid. He couldn't make sense of it.

As he tried to regain his composure and turned toward the shattered window to return fire, he came face-to-face with Psych.

Psych had abruptly halted his assault as well, locking eyes with Taekjoo. Despite the raging winds and relentless noise, the two stood still, staring at each other for what felt like an eternity. In that moment, it was as if they were trapped in a vacuum, just the two of them. The shock was so profound that Taekjoo even forgot to breathe.

A stray liquor bottle rolled across the floor, bumping against Taekjoo's side. The sudden contact snapped him out of his trance. Without hesitation, he raised his gun and aimed directly at Psych.

Psych's eyes widened slightly but only for a moment. Then, unexpectedly, he reached out. Taekjoo's shoulder tensed reflexively at the motion.

"Come here," Psych commanded.

The tone was firm, almost stern, but there was a strange trace of desperation woven into it. Taekjoo hesitated, stepping back instinctively. Psych's expression tightened, his face etched with a mix of urgency and frustration.

Meanwhile, Mathias's bodyguards had regrouped and unleashed a concentrated volley of gunfire at the helicopter. Bullets ricocheted off the fuselage, sparking flashes of light. The helicopter began to sway, its rotors perilously close to the building's exterior.

"Taekjoo, come here!" Psych called out again, louder this time, his hand reaching further despite the barrage of bullets.

Taekjoo hesitated, utterly conflicted. If Psych intended to harm him, wouldn't he have already used the minigun to tear him apart? Instead, Psych was half-hanging out of the helicopter, risking his life just to reach him. The desperation in his gestures was unmistakable.

Was it possible that Taekjoo held something so valuable to Psych that he'd take such risks to keep him alive? Or was there something else entirely at play?

But what truly captured Taekjoo's attention wasn't the hand reaching for him. It was the emotion glimmering in those piercing blue eyes—an emotion he thought he recognized. It looked like longing, raw and aching.

For a moment, Taekjoo found himself drawn forward, as if something invisible was pulling him toward Psych. He took a hesitant step closer.

But then, his leg was suddenly grabbed.

Startled, Taekjoo glanced down. Mathias was holding onto him, pulling him back with all his strength.

"Hey, Taekjoo! It's too dangerous!" Mathias shouted.

Taekjoo looked back and forth between Mathias's grip on his leg and Psych's outstretched hand. The intensity in Psych's voice grew as he called out again, this time almost pleading:

"Taekjoo!"

His mind darted back and forth relentlessly, his heart pounding furiously. What should he do? How could he act? In the chaos, his thoughts tangled, unable to settle on any single path forward. Following Psych would be like walking into a trap, yet trusting Matías was hardly an option either.

"Sunbaeee!"

Just as his turmoil peaked, a familiar voice halted him. It came from inside the helicopter. The voice's owner was seated in the cockpit, wearing a headset, though from Taekjoo's position, he couldn't see the man's face.

"Aaaaah! Mr. Yevgeny, I can't hold on much longer!"

The same voice had cried out in a panic a moment before, sparking a vivid memory in Taekjoo's mind.

"At this rate, I'm really gonna die! You hear me, you maniac?! I'm gonna die!"

"...Yoon Jongwoo?"

The name matched the owner of the gaming account he'd connected with on that forum, the one his mother had also mentioned. Could they be the same person? If they shared an account, they must have been close. And the fact that Jongwoo was close enough to exchange personal greetings with his mother meant their connection went deeper.

His hesitation allowed the guards' gunfire to grow even more intense. Bullets ricocheted off the windows, and the helicopter's exterior took a beating. But in that instant of decision, Taekjoo steeled himself and lunged toward the helicopter. Matías seized his collar once again.

"Taekjoo! Are you really going? You have no idea how dangerous he is!"

“Are you any different?”

For a moment, Matías was struck speechless. Taekjoo shook him off and sprinted for the helicopter. Psych reached out, pulling him into a tight embrace the moment he got close, his arms wide open. Then, in an instant, he aimed his gun straight at Matías.

He was going to die.

In that instant of unwavering resolve, Matías’s body froze just as a bazooka struck the helicopter with brutal force. The helicopter lurched upward in haste. Moments later, something tumbled from it, catching Matías's eye. Realizing what it was, he threw himself to the side to avoid it. A deafening explosion followed, sending violent tremors through the entire building. Every window and door in the villa blew out at once.

When Matías finally gathered his senses, the entire room had been obliterated—except for the spot where he stood. Stunned, he watched the helicopter disappear into the distance. A hollow feeling washed over him, as if he’d lost something he never even had. Dust from the ceiling drifted down, landing on his head, jolting him back to the moment. He let out a dry laugh.

“Psych... the infamous Psych has fallen in love. Truly fallen in love.”

He shook his head slowly, still unable to believe it, a smile of disbelief creeping onto his face.

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END OF VOLUME 8

Chapter End Notes

Support the author by purchasing the novel on Ridibooks.

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Petition to start a Matías hate club, lol. And with that, we’re officially done with Volume 8! We’re slowly nearing the end of this amazing novel—only two volumes to go. I just keep falling more and more in love with Zhenya and Taekjoo with every chapter I translate; they’re honestly on another level. Huge thanks to everyone who’s stuck with me so far. I hope you’re all enjoying it as much as I am! See you in Volume 9!

Rewind Time

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VOLUME 9

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The villa erupted in flames as the bomb dropped, sending a plume of black smoke skyward. Only then did Zhenya release the trigger of the minigun. Taekjoo remained limp in his arms, completely unresponsive. Concern flashed across Zhenya's face as he glanced down at him. Taekjoo's eyes were shut, and a faint groan escaped his lips. His body was unnervingly slack.

"Taekjoo...?"

Zhenya gently shifted him away to get a better look. Taekjoo's face was drenched in sweat, and Zhenya's sharp gaze quickly scanned his body. His pants, where they pressed against his thigh, were dark and wet. The sharp metallic tang in the air told Zhenya all he needed to know—it was blood. Taekjoo must have been hit by one of the bullets as they boarded the helicopter under a hail of gunfire.

Acting quickly, Zhenya laid Taekjoo flat and pressed a towel against the gunshot wound to staunch the bleeding. He leaned in close to check his breathing and pulse. The grim expression on his face prompted Yoon Jongwoo, who had turned pale, to look back anxiously.

"Sunbae! Are you okay? Please, say something!"

Zhenya motioned sharply for Jongwoo to come closer. The younger man scrambled over, half-crawling. Zhenya grabbed Jongwoo's belt and yanked it free before wrapping it tightly around Taekjoo's thigh as a makeshift tourniquet. Then, pulling Jongwoo's trembling hands toward the wound, he ordered him to apply pressure.

Propping up Taekjoo's injured leg with a nearby ammunition box, Zhenya rummaged through the medical kit. The chaotic movement scattered its contents, but he quickly grabbed gauze and bandages, applying them with more precision to stem the bleeding.

"Come on, wake up, Sunbae. Stay with us."

Jongwoo pleaded, his voice shaking as he reached out for Taekjoo's shoulder. But Zhenya swatted his hand away, fiercely pulling Taekjoo into his arms. The grip was so tight that it wrung a pained groan from Taekjoo, but Zhenya didn't let go.

The helicopter soared through the stormy Turkish skies, surrounded by dark clouds.

Taekjoo's thoughts drifted. Never once had he wanted to live like his father or older brother. Their lives may have been outwardly glorious, deserving of admiration, but for their family, they left behind nothing but scars that would last a lifetime. That was why Taekjoo had always dismissed his mother's fears for him as baseless. He had enrolled in college based on his average grades, landing in a program that wasn't particularly fascinating but didn't feel completely mismatched either. The classes were manageable, and his campus life, including relationships with peers, was decent. He figured graduating and finding a job in his field wouldn't be a bad path. Unlike his peers, he lacked both anxiety about the future and grand aspirations.

After two years, he took a leave of absence to complete his mandatory military service. Although he initially wanted to join the Marines for the challenge, his mother's persistent objections led him to enlist in the regular army instead. However, within six months, he grew disillusioned. The endless drills felt like an exercise in futility, wasting both time and effort.

By chance, he came across a recruitment notice for special forces non-commissioned officers. The fact that active-duty soldiers could apply caught his eye, and he decided to give it a shot without much hesitation. He aced both the written and physical exams, securing first place and passing with ease. The accepted recruits were all physically capable, but the grueling four-month training program weeded out many. Even during the three months of basic training post-commissioning, a significant number dropped out.

The relentless schedule pushed physical limits daily, but his mind remained sharp, more so than ever before. The excruciating physical pain left no room for doubts or distractions. Perhaps that's why he became so deeply immersed in the experience.

The only downside was the mandatory four-year service period post-commissioning. He had kept his new role as a special forces operative a secret from his mother, who still believed he would soon finish his military service and return to school. The longer this went on, the more he agonized over how to break the news to her. It was during this internal conflict that he received a summons from higher command.

Dressed formally in his ceremonial uniform, he made his way to the brigade commander's office. Encounters with generals of brigadier rank or higher were rare, usually reserved for receiving awards. The sudden nature of the summons piqued his curiosity.

Before entering, he adjusted his uniform, straightened his black beret, and took a deep breath. After knocking on the door, he heard a voice granting him permission to enter. He stepped in, closed the door behind him, and offered a crisp salute.

“Unity! Staff Sergeant Kwon Taekjoo, reporting as ordered.”

“Ah, come in,” the brigade commander greeted him warmly, smiling.

Seated next to the commander was the chief of staff, and across from them sat an unfamiliar civilian. The civilian, dressed in a sharp black suit, scrutinized Taekjoo from head to toe with a meticulous gaze.

“Is this the operative?”

“Yes. Although he’s only in his second year of service, he’s exceptional in all areas—infiltration, assassination, guerrilla warfare, special reconnaissance, information warfare, and hostage rescue. Among his peers, he has the fastest promotion record and has already received multiple commendations.”

"They even have a long family history of receiving military honors. And he's sharp as a tack—just the kind of talent you're looking for."

The brigade commander added with enthusiasm. Both he and the chief of staff heaped praise on Kwon Taekjoo's military career. The man, who had been quietly assessing Taekjoo as they spoke, finally broke his silence.

"Tell me, have you ever considered working for your country in a different capacity?"

"I'm already serving my country."

"Haha, of course. What I’m proposing is something a bit more discreet and… specialized."

The man grinned as he handed over a business card. On it was printed the unfamiliar name *Eulji Networks* and the title *Kim Dongmyung, Sales Manager.* Something about it felt off, and Taekjoo’s instincts told him the name was likely fake.

Later, curiosity got the better of him, and he looked up the company online. His search yielded almost no results, confirming his suspicions.

Not long after, the unit granted him a two-day special leave. Taekjoo decided to visit the address listed on the card. The location turned out to be a dilapidated commercial building, almost in ruins. Most of the offices were vacant except for one on the fourth floor—*Eulji Networks.* From the outside, it looked no different from a temp agency.

He knocked on the office door, but there was no response. Trying the handle, he found the door unlocked and stepped inside. A middle-aged woman was engrossed in a game of *Go-Stop* on her computer. Without even glancing up, she asked, "What brings you here?"

"I was referred here," Taekjoo said, handing her the business card.

The woman gave the card a quick glance before making a phone call. "He’s here," she said simply, then hung up. With a nod toward a worn-out sofa, she gestured for him to sit. "Wait there for a bit."

That "bit" stretched into several hours. When lunchtime arrived, the woman briefly left her desk and returned with two rolls of kimbap, one of which she wordlessly handed to him. When the typical workday ended, she shut down her computer, slung her bag over her shoulder, and prepared to leave.

Before walking out, she placed a single key on the desk in front of Taekjoo.

"Once you lock the door with this key, just leave it in the flower pot outside."

"What? And how long am I supposed to wait here?"

"You'll find out soon enough," she replied cryptically before leaving the office without another word.

As her footsteps faded into the distance, the silence in the room deepened. Taekjoo sat there alone, unsure of what to make of the situation. As the night stretched on and midnight approached, even the distant hum of passing cars seemed to dwindle. In the stillness, his hearing grew sharper, and he clearly caught the sound of a car pulling up outside the building.

He stood and peered out through the frosted window film. A black sedan had stopped at the entrance, but no one got out. The area around the car was eerily deserted, and it simply idled there, as if waiting.

It was time to act. Adrenaline coursed through his veins, his body responding instinctively to the suspense. Without hesitation, Taekjoo headed downstairs. As he reached the ground floor, the driver of the sedan stepped out to meet him. The man was dressed in a black suit and wore dark sunglasses, much like the one who had approached Taekjoo at his unit. Without a word, the driver opened the back door of the car.

Taekjoo got in and accepted the blindfold the man handed him. The car started moving, leaving the dark alley behind. It navigated a maze of narrow streets, taking turns and loops that made it impossible for Taekjoo to get a sense of direction. When they finally reached their destination, the driver exited first and opened the door for Taekjoo.

Still blindfolded, Taekjoo followed the man’s lead down a long corridor. At last, they stopped in front of a door. The driver knocked, and a voice from inside gave permission to enter. It wasn’t the same voice as the man who had approached Taekjoo at the base.

As Taekjoo stepped inside, he immediately noticed the room was brighter than the corridor.

"Did you really have to put a blindfold on him?"

Came a low chuckle from across the room. The voice belonged to the room’s occupant, who gestured for the driver to leave. "You can go now," he said. The driver gave a polite bow before quietly exiting and shutting the door behind him.

"You can take that off now."

Taekjoo didn't hesitate and removed the blindfold in one swift motion. The sudden flood of light made him blink a few times to adjust.

Im Daehyung, head of the Intelligence Division.

The first thing Taekjoo noticed was the nameplate on the desk. It bore the clear emblem of the National Intelligence Service. He lifted his gaze and looked at the man behind the desk—a middle-aged man with a friendly demeanor who greeted him with a warm smile.

"Nice to meet you. Coming all the way here must mean you're ready to dedicate yourself to the country, right?"

Taekjoo's eyes fluttered open, his vision blurry at first. A white ceiling and a row of hanging IV bags came into focus. He followed the tubing with his eyes, and soon enough, a familiar head appeared in his line of sight. He tried to move his fingers slightly. The motion startled the person next to him, who raised their head in surprise.

The sight that greeted him was almost comical—swollen, bloodshot eyes, blotchy skin, and a red nose.

"Sunbae!"

"…Yoon Jongwoo?"

"Do you remember me?"

"What happened to your face? You've gotten so ugly."

"Waaah! Sunbae!"

Overwhelmed with relief, Yoon Jongwoo lunged forward, wrapping Taekjoo in a tight hug. Taekjoo winced as pain shot through his leg, making him cry out. Jongwoo quickly released him and backed away in a panic. Taekjoo glanced down and noticed his leg was bandaged—a clear reminder of the bullet that grazed him during their frantic escape from Matthias's villa.

The memories of that harrowing escape came flooding back: the agonizing decision between Matthias and Psych, Psych's desperate voice calling his name, and the moment he leapt into Psych's arms without any real certainty. He vividly recalled the instant he landed in Psych's embrace, his scent filling his senses. For some inexplicable reason, he had felt a profound sense of relief. Perhaps it was the sheer strength and breadth of Psych's frame, enough to hold him completely.

How much time had passed since then? Where was he now, and how had Yoon Jongwoo ended up here? Most pressing of all—where was Psych?

The questions came rushing in as soon as he regained consciousness, each one layering over the last. It seemed unlikely he would feel fully at ease until he had pieced together every

fragment of his memory. Another sharp headache began to creep in, and Taekjoo let out a long sigh to steady himself.

He had dreamed of this a long time ago—or rather, it wasn't a dream but a fragment of a lost memory. As his thoughts replayed, Taekjoo remembered how he had ended up becoming a special forces operative and, eventually, joined the National Intelligence Service. He had accepted the NIS's exclusive recruitment offer on the spot. It had been a time when he thrived on pushing himself to his limits, reveling in the thrill of achieving seemingly impossible goals. The added justification of working for the "national interest" made the decision even easier.

To his mother, he explained that he had been studying for the civil service exam during his military service and had passed as a Level 7 administrative officer. She wasn't disappointed when he told her he wouldn't be returning to school. In fact, she seemed content, relieved even, that her only son had secured a stable and, presumably, safe job.

After half a year of additional training, Taekjoo was deployed to active duty. The assignments were more diverse and unconventional than anything he had faced during his special forces days—missions where "it doesn't work" wasn't an option. Physically demanding as it was, every successful operation gave him a rush that was impossible to compare to anything else. It was unlike anything he had experienced before—pure adrenaline coursing through his veins.

For years, he operated alone, until one day he was assigned a junior partner: Yoon Jongwoo, a prodigy who had won a world hacking championship. When they first met, Jongwoo was cautious, clumsy, and easily frightened. Over time, as Taekjoo's memories sharpened, he realized that Jongwoo had remained exactly the same—overly cautious, adorably clumsy, and prone to fear—but with a heart so big it almost compensated for everything else.

Now, staring down at Taekjoo, Jongwoo's eyes brimmed with tears, which eventually spilled over, streaming down his cheeks. His glasses fogged up entirely from his quiet sobbing.

"Hey, what's this? Why is a grown man bawling like a baby?"

"It's because… it's because you—"

"Ah, for crying out loud, I can't watch this."

Taekjoo forced himself upright despite Jongwoo's panicked protests. Ignoring the pain in his side, he grabbed a towel from the side table and tossed it at Jongwoo. Jongwoo buried his face into the towel, sobbing softly for a while longer.

He looked utterly exhausted, as if he had been through hell and back. What was he even doing here in Turkey? A guy like him should have been sitting quietly in the back office doing support work. And how on earth had he ended up with Psych? The questions kept piling up.

Taekjoo glanced around again, trying to make sense of his surroundings. The room was far too large and lavish to be a standard hospital or hotel room. It wasn't anything like Matthias's

villa, either. Had Psych arranged this? And why would he offer such accommodations?

Right now, the only person he could trust was Jongwoo. If he was going to figure anything out, he'd have to start by asking him.

"Why are *you* here, of all people?"

"Me? I came to find you, Sunbae."

"Headquarters sent you?"

"...Something like that."

Jongwoo mumbled, avoiding direct eye contact. Taekjoo's eyes narrowed.

"Out of everyone they could've sent, *you* were the one they chose?"

"Why does it have to be *me*, huh? What's so wrong about that?"

"Do I really have to spell it out?"

"Unbelievable! Do you have any idea how much I went through to find you?"

"Judging by the state you're in, I can tell."

"You're too much, really."

Jongwoo grumbled, glaring at him but already calming down. The tears that had been welling in his eyes earlier had completely disappeared by now. Taekjoo let out a soft chuckle before asking a question that had been weighing on his mind.

"I need some confirmation here. I'm still with the NIS, right?"

"Of course you are!"

"And my trip to Iran—was that an official assignment?"

"Yes. You were tasked with escorting a North Korean defector to the embassy. But then a third-party group caused that terror attack, and you got caught up in the middle of it."

"So, the mission failed?"

"No way! Who do you think you are? You're *the* ace of the NIS, with a 100% mission completion rate! There's no way you'd leave a job unfinished. Actually, the operation in Iran was a follow-up to one of the only missions you almost failed before. You insisted on wrapping it up yourself, so they assigned you the task. Even in all that chaos, you managed to hand off the defector to another agent safely, and they reached the embassy without any issues. Now, the defector is preparing for asylum and has already been reunited with their family."

Jongwoo's explanation finally started to clear up some of the questions Taekjoo had been grappling with. As a black operative, his identity must have been carefully concealed during entry, leaving no official records behind. It also explained why his identity couldn't be verified, why he was fluent in multiple languages, his heightened sense of caution, and his extraordinary reflexes and crisis management skills.

However, now that his identity was confirmed, a new question emerged.

"So, what's the deal with that Russian ambassador?"

"Wait, you remember Mr. Yevgeny?"

"...Not really. I just know that guy's a Russian ambassador. My mom keeps talking like I work for him or something."

"Oh, that's because you lied to your mom and told her you worked at the Russian Embassy in Seoul. You didn't want her to know you worked for the NIS. Mr. Yevgeny just played along with it."

"Hold on. So that guy *is* actually the Russian ambassador?"

"Surprisingly, yes."

"Then it makes even less sense. Why would the Russian ambassador go along with my lie? What kind of relationship do I have with him?"

"Um... Well, he said you're friends."

"Who said that?"

"You did, Sunbae."

"I *said* I'm friends with that guy?"

Jongwoo nodded in earnest, his expression devoid of mischief. It was clear he wasn't joking or trying to trick Taekjoo.

When and how had Taekjoo become friends with the third son of a powerful Russian family? If Jongwoo's account was accurate, this high-ranking Russian diplomat—and infamous underground arms dealer known as "Psych"—had not only gone along with his fabricated story but also traveled all the way here to rescue him. Why? The thought pushed Taekjoo's already limited imagination to its limits. A dull throb began to form in his head.

"How exactly did I even meet that guy?"

At Taekjoo's follow-up question, Jongwoo launched into a story about how, years ago, Taekjoo had been sent on a solo mission to Russia. Apparently, he had mistaken Psych—who was with the FSB at the time—for his assigned partner and ended up working alongside him. At one point, Taekjoo had nearly been killed by him. He barely escaped with his life, reuniting with Jongwoo afterward. Later, Psych had a change of heart, helped them resolve

the situation, and all loose ends were tied up. Somewhere in the process, Taekjoo's mother had discovered his NIS affiliation. To protect his cover, Psych—who later came to South Korea as the Russian ambassador—added Taekjoo's name to the embassy staff list. Taekjoo's mother, believing Psych to be her son's superior, had started treating him warmly. Their bond grew from there.

The more Taekjoo listened, the less sense it all made. He felt like he needed to go over everything step by step.

"Wait, wait! You said that guy was FSB, right?"

"Yes, and not just any FSB agent. He was a one-man unit in the infamous Spetsgruppa Alpha," Jongwoo whispered, as if someone might overhear.

Taekjoo frowned. "And I almost got killed because I mistook him for an ally?"

"It was really touch-and-go back then," Jongwoo admitted.

"But then he came all the way to Korea and helped me out?"

"Exactly! I'm not sure why, but Mr. Yevgeny helped you escape and even played a part in catching the real culprit. After that, he became the Russian ambassador to South Korea, and while visiting your house, he somehow became best friends with your mom."

Jongwoo's story was almost impossible to process. It felt like there was a critical piece missing, a loose screw preventing the whole thing from making sense. Fighting the uncomfortable knot in his chest, Taekjoo pressed for clarification.

"So, let me get this straight. I almost got killed by this Yevgeny guy, then somehow became friends with him. Now, I'm pretending to work under him at the embassy to keep my mom in the dark? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"And that guy's going along with it, coming all the way to Korea just to play along?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"How would I know?" Jongwoo replied with a cheerful grin.

A sigh escaped Taekjoo's lips. He reached out, placing a hand on Jongwoo's shoulder. "Jongwoo."

"Yes?"

"Do you even realize the nonsense you're spewing right now? You should at least try to make it sound plausible."

"Hey! It might sound unbelievable, but it's all true!"

Jongwoo exclaimed, his face scrunching up in protest as he clenched his fists in frustration. It wasn't the time for baseless fabrications, and Jongwoo wasn't skilled enough at lying to pull off something so elaborate.

That meant everything he'd just said had to be true. But how? How could this possibly be the truth? Taekjoo had never maintained personal connections with anyone he encountered during a mission. Even in situations where he had to spend the night with the target, it never extended beyond that. It was a strict principle: personal feelings had no place in the field, and someone like him—who shouldn't even exist—couldn't afford such entanglements.

So how had it come to this? How had a man he first met as an enemy followed him all the way to Korea, inserting himself into Taekjoo's life? If it were a case of revenge, it might make sense. But that didn't explain why Psych had grown close to Taekjoo's mother, participated in his deception, or risked his life to find him.

Taekjoo groaned, overwhelmed by the unsolvable mystery. Suddenly, a thought struck him.

"Wait a second. What's with the tattoo on my leg?"

"A tattoo? You got a tattoo, Sunbae? Where is it?"

Jongwoo asked, his expression turning genuinely surprised as his eyes scanned Taekjoo's body. They'd been to saunas together countless times, drunk themselves into oblivion and crashed at each other's places, and even gone swimming half-naked. If Taekjoo had had a tattoo for a while, Jongwoo would definitely have noticed.

Kwon Taekjoo casually tugged up the skin of his thigh to reveal the tattoo on the inside. Yoon Jongwoo leaned in close, practically burying his face to get a better look.

“Whoa, it's real! Is this Cyrillic? When did you get this? Tattoos are banned under NIS regulations. I've gone to saunas and swimming pools with my Sunbae, and I never noticed!”

“Really? Guess it hasn't been that long since I got it.”

“The lines are sharp, so that makes sense. But what does it say?”

Yoon Jongwoo inspected the tattoo with wide-eyed curiosity, even brushing his fingers over the inked skin. Had he really been completely unaware of this? For Kwon Taekjoo to break regulations and get this tattoo, it had to mean something significant.

“By any chance... do you know what ‘Anastasia’ means—”

He didn't get to finish. A distinct sound from outside the door made both of them freeze. Without so much as a knock, the door swung open. Kwon Taekjoo and Yoon Jongwoo simultaneously turned toward the intruder: Zhenya. The moment Zhenya saw Yoon Jongwoo practically nose-to-thigh with Taekjoo, his expression turned ice-cold.

His sharp gaze then shifted to Taekjoo, as if demanding an explanation. Taekjoo furrowed his brows, unsure if he was imagining things.

“Oh, Mr. Yevgeny! I was just about to tell you that Taekjoo woke up—”

Yoon Jongwoo stood up with an awkward grin, but Zhenya stormed toward him and shoved him aside. Though it seemed like a light push, Jongwoo went sprawling to the floor. Seeing this, Kwon Taekjoo clenched his fists and charged.

“You bastard—!”

He swung at Zhenya, but the man caught his face in both hands before the punch could land. Taekjoo retaliated by hitting Zhenya in the side and arm, but the other man didn’t even flinch. Instead, Zhenya stared directly into Taekjoo’s eyes, his gaze so intense it seemed to pierce right through him. Then, without warning, Zhenya leaned in and pressed his lips to Taekjoo’s. Taekjoo froze. The kiss had come so suddenly, so completely out of left field, that his whole body went rigid.

“Ah—… Ugh!”

Yoon Jongwoo, who had been rubbing his sore backside, screamed in shock at the bizarre sight unfolding before him. Snapping out of his daze, Taekjoo tried to shove Zhenya away, but the man didn’t budge, solid as a rock. Taekjoo swung his fists at him, clawed at the hands gripping his face, tried everything to pry himself free—but nothing worked.

Zhenya stubbornly licked Kwon Taekjoo’s tightly sealed lips with his thick tongue. When his lips refused to part, Zhenya bit down on the soft lower one. The sharp pain made Taekjoo instinctively gasp, and in that moment, Zhenya’s tongue forced its way into his mouth, pushing deep, as if intent on suffocating him. Taekjoo’s reflexes kicked in—he bit down hard. Zhenya flinched and pulled away, the taste of blood lingering in Taekjoo’s mouth.

“Haah... haah... What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Taekjoo growled in a low, strained voice, his eyes blazing with anger. His body tensed, ready to retaliate at any moment. Zhenya, breathing heavily, glared back at him with a strange, almost frustrated look. It was as if he was blaming Taekjoo for something—but for what?

“Mr. Yevgeny, stop it! Koreans don’t kiss people just to say hello!”

Yoon Jongwoo shouted, grabbing Zhenya’s arm in an attempt to pull him back. Zhenya didn’t even glance at him. His eyes stayed fixed on Taekjoo as he abruptly reached out and gripped Jongwoo’s neck. Jongwoo choked, struggling as his limbs flailed.

“What are you doing?! Let go of him!”

“...”

“Let go of him. Now.”

Taekjoo's voice was low and cold, but his glare carried a deadly edge. Zhenya ignored him, his grip on Jongwoo tightening. Without hesitation, Taekjoo struck the inside of Zhenya's elbow with the edge of his hand. The sharp blow forced Zhenya's grip to loosen, and Jongwoo slipped to the floor, gasping for air. Seizing the moment, Taekjoo twisted Zhenya's arm and yanked it forward, forcing Zhenya's body toward him. Keeping his hold firm, he bent Zhenya's arm outward to immobilize him. Taekjoo glanced toward the dazed Jongwoo and jerked his head toward the door.

"Yoon Jongwoo. Get out."

"But—"

"I said, get out! I've got this!"

"Mr. Yevgeny, please. My Sunbae is still a patient. His memory isn't fully intact, you know that. Don't forget it, okay? You two, please don't fight."

Yoon Jongwoo tried once more to remind Zhenya of Kwon Taekjoo's fragile state as he awkwardly got to his feet. Even as he shuffled toward the door, he kept glancing back at the two of them, hesitating. With a resigned sigh, Taekjoo nodded as if to say, *Don't worry.*

After casting one last anxious look their way, Jongwoo left the room, closing the door quietly behind him. There was no sound of footsteps retreating—Taekjoo knew he was probably hovering just outside, pacing nervously.

Inside, Zhenya made no move to retaliate. Taekjoo still had his arm twisted painfully beyond its natural range, yet Zhenya didn't flinch or even let out a groan. He simply let himself remain restrained, following Taekjoo's lead without resistance.mSomething felt off. That's when Taekjoo noticed Zhenya's head leaning against his neck, his sharp nose just barely brushing Taekjoo's skin. A moment later, Zhenya took in a deep breath, as if inhaling him.

"...Taekjoo."

Zhenya exhaled, his voice a soft, almost sorrowful sigh. The sound stirred something inexplicable deep within Taekjoo's chest, spreading like an unfamiliar warmth that left him on edge. Goosebumps prickled across his skin, and without thinking, he shoved Zhenya away.

Snapping out of his trance, Zhenya blinked, as though he had just realized what he was doing.

"Get off me. It's disgusting."

Taekjoo snapped, scowling in discomfort. He couldn't deny how awkward and itchy it felt, being so close to another man. Maybe it was fine for Zhenya, a foreigner who didn't seem to mind such contact, but it wasn't something Taekjoo was used to. He even began to wonder if he'd grown too soft, letting his guard down to the point where something like a hug or a kiss between friends felt almost acceptable.

Zhenya, however, looked utterly incredulous. He let out a bitter chuckle, though there was a trace of something wounded in his expression.

"You've forgotten, haven't you?" he asked, his tone carrying a faint edge of disbelief. *"Do you really remember nothing? It's that easy for you to forget?"*

His brows furrowed deeply, his voice trembling with quiet resentment. For a brief moment, Taekjoo thought he saw a flicker of despair in Zhenya's eyes—raw and unfamiliar, but unmistakable.

"You can't do this."

Zhenya shook his head slowly as he cornered Kwon Taekjoo.

"You said I should trust you. That you'd fix everything and come back on your own two feet."

"..."

"You even said you'd come to get me. Or were you planning to leave me abandoned like that forever?"

The repeated accusations left Taekjoo unsure of how to respond. He had no idea what kind of relationship they'd had, nor what kind of promise he might have made to Zhenya before leaving for Iran. Was this the kind of situation where he was supposed to apologize first?

"I'm sorry, but to be honest I don't remember anything about you. I have no idea why you're acting like this all of a sudden."

Zhenya's expression hardened, his brows knitting together in displeasure. Without a word, he stared into Taekjoo's eyes, his gaze unwavering. Then, without warning, he surged forward and pulled him into a crushing embrace. The force squeezed the air from Taekjoo's lungs, leaving him gasping.

"Let me go, damn it!"

He struggled to push Zhenya away, but the man was larger and stronger, pressing into him with unrelenting force. The harder Taekjoo fought, the tighter Zhenya held him. The more Taekjoo resisted, the tighter Zhenya's grip became. No matter how close their friendship was, wasn't this a bit much for a reunion? And where on earth did he get such strength? Despite his delicate appearance, Zhenya's overwhelming physical power drained Taekjoo in an instant. Having never been overpowered by anyone before, he found himself utterly bewildered.

Zhenya buried his face against Taekjoo's neck, nuzzling into the skin. His warm lips brushed against Taekjoo's ear before his tongue trailed down his cheek in a slow, deliberate stroke, finally sliding over his lips.

"Wait—stop—"

The moment Taekjoo opened his mouth in shock, their lips met again. Zhenya's tongue forced its way inside, hot and insistent, pressing Taekjoo's own tongue down as it invaded further. The sudden intrusion made him gag, his throat convulsing in protest. Taekjoo's chest heaved as he struggled for air, saliva pooling uncontrollably at the corners of his mouth. Zhenya, undeterred, swallowed it all greedily, as though desperate to absorb every part of him. Taekjoo swung his elbow into Zhenya's ribs and raised his knee to kick at his side repeatedly, but the man didn't budge. His unyielding persistence made it clear—he wouldn't stop until Taekjoo was utterly suffocated, as if trying to steal the very life out of him.

The lack of oxygen was overwhelming, every breath stolen from him, leaving Kwon Taekjoo light-headed and faint. His head spun as his vision blurred, and the strength in his arms gradually ebbed away.

Zhenya, who had been engrossed in their desperate kiss, suddenly froze. His gaze dropped, and his face darkened as he noticed the bandages wrapped around Taekjoo's thigh had turned a deep crimson. The intensity of their struggle must have reopened the wound.

"Taekjoo?"

"Goddamn it… what the hell is wrong with you?"

Taekjoo panted, his voice faint and uneven. Moments later, his eyes fluttered shut, and his body went limp. The hands that had been feebly pushing Zhenya away now dropped lifelessly onto the bed.

"Taekjoo!"

Zhenya called out, his voice shaking as he cupped Taekjoo's sweat-drenched face, lightly tapping his cheeks. No response. Quickly, Zhenya checked Taekjoo's condition. His skin was feverish to the touch, and with each shallow breath, his shoulders and chest heaved dramatically. His mouth hung open, releasing labored gasps. None of this looked good.

Without hesitation, Zhenya sprang to his feet and rushed out of the room. At the doorway, Yoon Jongwoo, who had been loitering nervously, jumped at the sight of him. Zhenya barely spared him a glance, ignoring the unspoken question in his wide eyes, and stormed past, his movements urgent and uncoordinated. Left behind, Jongwoo hesitated briefly before rushing into the room.

"Sunbae!"

Taekjoo's fading consciousness registered Jongwoo's frantic shouts as if from a great distance, the sound ebbing away like waves retreating into the horizon.

Soon, a doctor was called by Zhenya to examine Taekjoo. After disinfecting the reopened wound and replacing the soaked bandages, the doctor administered an antipyretic and anti-inflammatory medication. He sternly advised that Taekjoo be allowed to rest completely until he regained consciousness. The gunshot wound itself wasn't critical, the doctor explained,

but the risk of sepsis posed a far greater threat. Any signs of infection had to be watched for diligently.

While the injury was not life-threatening, Taekjoo's condition was still concerning. He had lost a significant amount of blood, and his physical state was severely weakened. Recovery would take time. His pallor alone told a grim story—exhaustion etched into his features, evidence of long days without proper nourishment or restful sleep. It wasn't surprising, though. To suddenly lose all your memories, to forget who you were and wander through life in utter uncertainty—it must have been a nightmare.

"Sunbae… Get better soon."

Yoon Jongwoo sat by Kwon Taekjoo's bedside, anxiously waiting for him to regain consciousness. Although Kwon Taekjoo was probably just in a deep sleep, his prolonged silence throughout the day made it hard for Jongwoo to hide his worry. Every second, his gaze darted to Taekjoo's face, only to grow more discouraged. With nothing else to do, he kept massaging Taekjoo's arm.

Time passed, and suddenly, Jongwoo's phone buzzed. Startled, he checked the screen – it was a message from headquarters. He unlocked it with his designated passcode and read the message: they wanted to know when he planned to return and if there was any news.

He sighed. Jongwoo's leave had been limited to one week. Officially, his mission from headquarters had only been to go to Iran and confirm Kwon Taekjoo's body. But Zhenya had insisted Taekjoo was alive and relentlessly chased his trail. It was already the third week since Jongwoo had decided to follow her, using up his vacation days and paid time off to buy time. Now, he had no other options left.

Should he contact Director Kwak, at least to let him know they'd found Kwon Taekjoo? After all, Kwak was Taekjoo's immediate superior and had approved this journey to Iran despite Zhenya's obstinate pursuit. He seemed to understand the situation well. And if Jongwoo wanted any support from headquarters when it was time to return, he'd have to play this right.

Decision made, Jongwoo searched for Director Kwak's contact information. He was just about to hit the call button when the door unexpectedly swung open. He flinched, looking as if he'd been caught red-handed.

"Oh! Mr. Ye… Yevgeny, you're still up?"

Zhenya stared at him in silence, scrutinizing him. Jongwoo's thumb hovered awkwardly over his phone's screen, trembling slightly. Zhenya approached him slowly, casting a shadow that loomed over Jongwoo's shoulders, which tensed instinctively.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, uh... I was just about to report to headquarters that we found him. As a Black Agent, if someone goes off-grid for too long, it can raise some unnecessary suspicions.

And when you finally report back, they'll grill you over where you've been and what you've been doing…"

Zhenya extended his hand. Jongwoo blinked in confusion. **"Huh?"** he muttered, raising an eyebrow. Zhenya simply stared at him, his hand remaining steady. With a nervous glance, Jongwoo slowly handed over his phone. Zhenya kept his gaze fixed on Jongwoo as he pressed down on the phone, and cracks began to spread out from where his thumb touched.

"Hey!"

"Who told you that you could do that?"

Zhenya asked coldly, his piercing gaze drilling into Jongwoo. With a snap, Jongwoo's phone shattered in Zhenya's hand. Then, he tossed the broken pieces back to Jongwoo, who fumbled to catch them, his face frozen in shock.

"Well? Who told you?"

"S-Sorry! It's just... if I don't report in soon, Sunbae might be listed as officially killed in action. They'll notify his mother, and once they erase his records, it's a mess to restore them."

"Let them. Didn't you say he was quitting anyway?"

"Well, yeah... but that was a decision made before all of this. Don't you think we should wait until he's fully himself again before making a call like that?"

Perhaps Zhenya didn't appreciate Jongwoo's response, as his jaw tightened. Even his once smooth forehead now had noticeable veins bulging, and his eyes, dark as night, stared at Jongwoo with intensity.

"I'm giving you one last warning. Don't even think about doing something foolish."

Zhenya spoke through gritted teeth, almost growling. Jongwoo, now thoroughly cowed, recoiled slightly. He had assumed that finding Taekjoo would mean they'd return to Korea together, something Taekjoo would want as well. But was Zhenya thinking something else entirely?

Jongwoo's mind was racing, trying to make sense of it, when Zhenya made an unexpected demand.

"Maybe you should head back now."

"Wait? Alone?"

"Yeah. Alone."

It felt as if Zhenya was saying he no longer had any use for Jongwoo and that it was time for him to leave. It was no surprise—Zhenya had always been known to do as he pleased.

But still. Jongwoo mustered all his courage and tried to protest.

“But Sunbae’s memories aren’t intact yet, and his body’s still weak...”

“And what difference does it make if you stay?”

“It *could* make a difference! I’m the only person he remembers right now. If I’m not here, he’ll feel even more lost! He might push Mr. Yevgeny away even harder!”

Jongwoo clenched his fists and shouted, his eyes squeezed shut as if bracing for some impending blow. But to his surprise, no physical retaliation came. Cautiously, he opened one eye, only to find Zhenya glaring at him with barely contained fury. Startled, Jongwoo quickly lowered his gaze.

Zhenya jerked his chin toward the door, silently ordering him to leave. When Jongwoo hesitated, rising slowly, Zhenya kicked the chair Jongwoo had been sitting on, sending it flying. Unable to endure the pressure any longer, Jongwoo hurried out of the room.

Now alone, Zhenya stood silently, looking down at the sleeping Taekjoo. Scars that hadn’t been there before marred his body, and even that infuriated Zhenya. The idea that something had happened to Taekjoo—something Zhenya hadn’t been there to prevent—was intolerable.

Taekjoo had always come back. No matter where he went or what state he was in, he had always returned. Zhenya never worried about losing him; if he wanted, he could watch his every move or chase after him. The thought of Taekjoo disappearing from the world had never even crossed his mind. He had let him go, arrogantly believing he would always return. He had even secretly waited, pretending not to care, for the day Taekjoo would come back and keep his promise to fetch him. How many days had he spent pacing by the window, waiting for him like a fool?

Perhaps it was because the wait had been so grueling. Now that Taekjoo was finally in front of him, Zhenya’s patience had worn thin. He knew Taekjoo’s condition. He knew his memories wouldn’t suddenly return. He *knew*. And yet, seeing Taekjoo warily keep his distance, pushing him away, tore at him unbearably. He didn’t know how to control the storm of emotions that raged inside. His fragile patience was fraying at every moment.

Grasping Taekjoo’s hand tightly, Zhenya rested his forehead against it. He couldn’t let him go anymore. He wouldn’t allow him to wander freely, lost and adrift, ever again. He swore to himself, over and over, that he would keep Taekjoo within his sight—always, without exception.

A deep, resonant ship horn broke through his consciousness. When he looked around, pitch-black darkness loomed everywhere. He glanced down. The white froth of waves crashing against the ship’s hull and the steady vibration rocking his body confirmed where he was. He took a deep breath, the unmistakable salty scent of the sea filling his lungs. Where had this ship departed from? Where was it heading? He gazed blankly at the endless rolling waves.

The oppressive silence was broken by a faint mechanical sound—a voice coming through his earpiece.

"How’s it going? Are you enjoying the romance of the nighttime sea?"

It was Jongwoo’s familiar voice. Was he on a mission? The stiffness in Taekjoo’s expression eased, and his lips curved upward ever so slightly.

"Not bad. Noisy, chaotic, and somehow still boring."

As soon as he spoke, his surroundings brightened. Silhouettes of people gathered in small groups, chatting, laughing, and passing by. The scene was utterly ordinary, which somehow made it feel even more peaceful. He moved among them, blending into the hum of life, before heading toward the ship’s interior.

Just then, someone rushing up from the lower deck slammed into his shoulder. A man with a flushed face shoved past him roughly, heading for the railing. For a fleeting moment, Taekjoo caught sight of the man’s bloodshot eyes. There was something eerily familiar about him. Taekjoo stood frozen for a second before instinctively chasing after the man, his steps driven by an inexplicable urgency.

The man, clearly in a panic, stumbled to the railing, trapped between escape and despair. When he turned and saw Taekjoo approaching, he lashed out, wildly brandishing a knife.

“Stay away!”

Strangely, Taekjoo felt like he knew this man. Every moment unfolding before him felt surreal yet deeply familiar.

“I said stay back!” the man snarled, slashing the air violently with the blade.

Taekjoo locked eyes with him, unshaken, and drew his handgun from his holster. He aimed at the man’s center mass. Cornered, the man’s frantic gaze wavered, darting between Taekjoo and something behind him. It was a subtle shift, but it didn’t escape Taekjoo’s notice. Without hesitation, Taekjoo turned and fired in the direction of the man’s glance.

"Argh!"

The woman hit by the bullet clutched her injured hand and collapsed onto the floor. Her gun rolled away, clanging as it hit the ground. Her ivory coat was quickly soaking with bright red blood.

Moments later, a heavy splash echoed behind him. He spun around to look at the railing where the man had been standing. The man was gone. Rushing to the railing, he peered into the dark, churning water below. Among the white foam, the man reappeared, breaking through the surface. He began swimming in the opposite direction of the ship, heading toward an old wooden boat that was creeping closer with all its lights off.

Letting out a deep breath, Taekjoo turned toward the injured woman. She was trembling as she shoved a pill of unknown origin into her mouth. He swiftly struck the back of her neck,

knocking her unconscious. To prevent any further drastic actions, he stuffed a handkerchief into her mouth and used a pair of handcuffs to secure her uninjured arm to the railing.

With the situation contained, he stood and took a deep breath before taking a running leap toward the railing.

"Haah!"

Using the railing as a foothold, he launched himself into the air and plunged headfirst into the dark, gaping maw of the ocean. The dense water resisted as he sliced through it, pulling him deeper and deeper into its inky void. He dove until he felt as though he had reached the very edge of a vacuum. Kicking his arms and legs, he began to swim upward toward the surface.

Then, his left foot snagged on something. Gritting his teeth, he kicked harder, trying to shake it off and propel himself upward. Instead, he was yanked down with sudden force. He flailed his arms desperately, but it was no use. His body was being dragged further into the suffocating abyss.

Panicking, he glanced downward and froze. It wasn't seaweed tangled around his legs. It was Chief Lim.

"...!"

Bubbles escaped his open mouth as shock set in. His lungs screamed for air. Twisting violently, he struggled to kick Lim off, but the man clung to him with unrelenting strength, dragging him deeper into the darkness. He couldn't let this be the end. Summoning every ounce of strength, he kicked Lim hard and broke free. With no time to spare, he kicked upward toward the surface.

Just as he thought he might reach it; a deafening mechanical roar filled his ears. Instinctively, he turned his head to look. The massive underside of the cruise ship loomed over him, and on either side, enormous propellers spun furiously, churning the water into a deadly maelstrom. They were coming straight for him.

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Chapter End Notes

Support the author by purchasing the novel on Ridibooks.

Rewind Time

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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"...Hah!"

Taekjoo eyes flew open wide, and the beads of sweat gathered on his forehead slid slowly down his temple. The lingering, nightmarish sensation left him shivering with uneven breaths. His limbs were stiff as stone, refusing to obey him, not even a twitch from his fingers. A thin, shaky exhale escaped his slightly parted lips. He closed his eyes tightly, forcing himself to ground his thoughts, and then reopened them. Finally, the rigidity left his body.

His mind was a chaotic mess, tangled with fragments of an unsettling dream. Memories jumbled and emerged erratically, leaving him unable to distinguish reality from illusion. Each night brought dreams drenched in déjà vu, making him feel as if he hadn't truly rested.

He ran his damp hands down his face, trying to shake off the remnants of sleep. That was when he sensed someone nearby. Turning his head, he saw Zhenya sitting silently in a chair beside the bed. The man was watching him intently, his face devoid of any discernible expression. How long had he been sitting there?

“...”

“...”

For a while, neither of them spoke, the silence stretching between them as if time itself had paused. Finally, Zhenya placed the cigar he’d been holding onto the table. The air felt unusually heavy, and now he realized why—it was the cigar. Once he noticed it, the rich, smoky scent became even more prominent. It was a heady mix of sharpness and sweetness, heavy and cloying all at once. A chill prickled at the back of his neck. The last time he'd

smelled a cigar was with Matías, and even then, his body had reacted poorly to it. This time, the discomfort was even stronger.

Zhenya suddenly stood, and the movement made the cigar's scent intensify, swirling around him like an aura. Instinctively, Kwon Taekjoo pushed himself halfway upright, his body tense with wariness. His breaths grew shallow, his body reacting faster than his mind.

Zhenya paused, seemingly registering Taekjoo's unease. Then, with no warning, he reached across the table and grabbed a damp towel. Without a word, he pressed it to Taekjoo's face. The cool sensation made Taekjoo flinch, his brow furrowing as his shoulders instinctively hunched. Zhenya paused again, watching his expression carefully. When Taekjoo didn't push him away, Zhenya resumed, gently wiping his face.

It was such an odd, mismatched gesture. Zhenya's sharp, focused gaze remained fixed on Taekjoo, unrelenting as if trying to drill through him. His face was set, stern and unsmiling, as if he were doing something far more critical than cleaning another man's face. Yet, despite his grim demeanor, his touch remained surprisingly careful.

Once Kwon Taekjoo's face was cleaned, Zhenya didn't hesitate to move the damp towel down to his neck. The cool, wet cloth against his warm, sticky skin made Taekjoo involuntarily shiver. Even as he grimaced and voiced his discomfort with a soft groan, Zhenya stubbornly continued wiping his neck.

Taekjoo couldn't figure this guy out. Zhenya's face was undeniably handsome, yet it was hard to feel any sort of fondness toward him. His touch was clumsy and awkward, rough even, as though he didn't quite know how to care for someone. His piercing blue eyes carried no hint of tenderness or concern—only lingering resentment. What kind of relationship had they shared? Taekjoo had lost so many memories, and with them came countless questions, but the biggest one of all was about Zhenya. Whatever bond they'd had before, it was clear Zhenya was central to everything he'd forgotten.

The increasingly heavy scent of cigars made his head pound. His chest thudded with an irregular rhythm, nausea churning in his stomach. Even his breathing and heartbeat became erratic.

"That's enough."

Taekjoo pulled back slightly to avoid Zhenya's persistent hands. Zhenya's hand, now lacking a target, shifted awkwardly to grab Taekjoo's arm instead, ignoring his discomfort entirely. He continued rubbing at Taekjoo's damp, clammy skin, resolute in his actions. Taekjoo found his insistent disregard infuriating. Was Zhenya so spoiled from living a life of luxury that he dismissed others' wishes to force his own? His behavior was childishly stubborn, like an overindulged brat.

When the towel crept up under his arm, Taekjoo had had enough. He snatched it away.

"I'll do it myself."

Taekjoo didn't know how close they'd been before he lost his memory, but right now, Zhenya felt unfamiliar and uncomfortable. It was impossible not to keep him at arm's length, no matter how Zhenya might feel about it. Sure enough, Zhenya seemed displeased. As the damp towel was pulled from his grasp, his empty hands hovered uncertainly in midair, as if unsure what to do next.

Taekjoo ignored him, looking around the room instead.

"Where's Jongwoo?"

"What, do you think I ate your precious junior or something?"

"...Don't be ridiculous. Just call him for me. I need to talk to him."

"Only him?"

"What?"

Taekjoo frowned, caught off guard by the sudden remark. For a moment, he wondered if he had misunderstood Zhenya's Russian.

"You barely made it back alive, and all you care about is that guy?"

The accusation was so absurd it made Taekjoo chuckle under his breath. Zhenya sounded like a sulking child, barely six years old, airing grievances at every opportunity. It was clear Zhenya was upset that Taekjoo remembered Jongwoo but not him. But what was Taekjoo supposed to do? Unlike Jongwoo, Zhenya hadn't offered any clear explanation of who they were to each other or what had happened between them. At this rate, his constant complaints only sounded like whining.

"Hey, what's your problem?"

Taekjoo challenged. Zhenya's expression shifted to one of incredulity, but Taekjoo had had enough.

"Look, I'm sorry I can't remember, but the one who's most frustrated and confused right now is me, not you. I didn't choose to end up like this. So why do you keep acting like I did this on purpose?"

"You're loud for someone who made promises they couldn't keep and nearly disappeared for good. You didn't choose this? No, Taekjoo, you brought this on yourself. I was left defenseless by your one-sided decisions. And now, you can't even handle a bit of resentment? You say you're sorry? That's not what someone truly sorry would act like."

"Then tell me! What promise did I make to you? Hell, at least explain what kind of relationship we had! All you're doing is throwing tantrums like a child. Is that it?"

Taekjoo shouted, his frustration boiling over. His voice echoed, loud enough to make his own chest tremble. He couldn't take Zhenya's accusatory attitude anymore. Zhenya, however,

didn't lose his composure. His expression remained stony as he looked down at Taekjoo, shaking his head with stubborn defiance.

"No. You're the one who lost it, so you're the one who has to figure it out on your own."

Taekjoo stared at him, stunned. Was this guy really his friend? It seemed impossible—laughable, even.

"You're telling me you were my friend? Are you sure about that?"

"For someone who remembers nothing, you sure believe whatever people tell you. If I said I was your lover, would you believe that too?"

"What kind of nonsense is that?"

Taekjoo's face twisted in anger, and Zhenya, as if expecting it, shot him a mocking glare. It was true—apart from his initial entry into the NIS and the moment he first met Jongwoo, most of Taekjoo's memories were a foggy mess. The gaps in between had been filled in by Jongwoo's explanations. While Taekjoo trusted Jongwoo completely, there was always an underlying unease. Now, it felt like Zhenya had seen right through that insecurity.

Taekjoo bit his lower lip hard and clenched his fists tightly.

"I need to go back to Korea."

"And then?"

"I need to report back to duty."

"Report back?"

Zhenya repeated, this time letting out an open scoff. His expression made it clear he thought the plan was laughable, and he pushed Taekjoo to elaborate.

"How do you plan to get to Korea?"

"I'll find a way. Once I contact headquarters, they can arrange a new passport. There's bound to be an embassy nearby."

"And you think I'll just stand by and let that happen?"

"And what if you don't? Are you planning to lock me up or something?"

"Who's to say I won't?"

Zhenya's voice turned cold as his face hardened, his threat chillingly casual. His obsessive behavior felt far from what one might expect of a friend. Taekjoo couldn't shake the thought that whatever personal bond they had formed must have been forged under strained, even hostile, circumstances.

Suddenly, Zhenya's hand shot out toward him. Startled, Taekjoo swatted it away with a sharp motion. In the next instant, Zhenya's fist slammed into the wall above Taekjoo's head. The sound of knuckles meeting plaster echoed sharply, and Taekjoo could hear the grit of Zhenya's teeth as he exhaled slowly, barely suppressing whatever anger simmered beneath the surface.

"…Taekjoo, stop testing my patience."

Zhenya muttered in a low voice and, without another word, he turned and stormed out of the room. The door wrenched open with a violent pull before slamming shut with a deafening bang. The force seemed to reverberate through the air, leaving the space heavy with its aftermath.

"Huh? What the hell is that bastard's deal?"

Taekjoo clicked his tongue in disbelief. Zhenya had been the one making threats, yet his expression now looked like someone who'd just been slapped across the face. He was constantly snapping about why Taekjoo didn't remember him, like it was some personal affront. Taekjoo couldn't begin to understand how his past self had ever gotten involved with such an insufferable person.

His gaze fell on the ashtray nearby, piled high with cigar ash. Unlike cigarettes, cigars burned much more slowly, but the sheer amount suggested Zhenya must have been sitting there for hours, waiting for Taekjoo to wake up—only to immediately press him about his memories. It almost felt like Taekjoo must have known the combination to some secret safe of his.

With a sigh, he wiped himself down with the towel. He wanted nothing more than to take a proper shower and wash away the grime, but the injury on his thigh made that unlikely. He tried moving his leg slightly, only to have pain shoot through it. Frustrated, he leaned his head back and let out a sharp click of his tongue.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. Moments later, the door creaked open, and Jongwoo peeked his head inside. When their eyes met, Jongwoo's face lit up, "You're awake!"

"It's time to eat."

Jongwoo carefully stepped into the room, carrying a tray. He walked to the bedside and gave Taekjoo a once-over, his gaze assessing. Thankfully, it didn't seem like Zhenya had roughed him up while he was unconscious.

"How long was I out?"

"About three days. Your body was completely drained, and the medication knocked you out. They said your recovery period is critical, so you need to rest and avoid pushing yourself too hard."

Jongwoo replied as he set the tray down and pulled up a chair. Taekjoo's stomach growled. Days of being out cold had left him feeling empty. He removed the lid from the tray, though he wasn't expecting much. Sure enough, the bowl of soup looked rich and greasy. Pressing

his lips together in reluctance, he forced himself to pick up the spoon. He needed to recover quickly, no matter what. The first bite was a strange mix of flavors: the seafood broth was light and savory, but the heavy creaminess quickly overwhelmed it. It wasn't outright unpleasant, but the taste lingered too long. He continued eating, albeit more slowly, until the richness began to churn in his stomach. His appetite waned, and his expression turned sour.

"For now, you'll have to stick to light meals like this. Your digestive system isn't back to normal yet."

Taekjoo nodded in agreement, but it didn't seem to encourage him to eat more. Though his stomach felt empty, his mind stubbornly rejected the food in front of him.

"I'm craving yukgaejang."

"Same here."

"Hangover soup wouldn't be bad either."

"It's so good."

"Even just a bite of ramen would hit the spot."

"You know, now that you mention it, I feel like I can smell ramen," Jongwoo joked, sniffing the air playfully.

Taekjoo chuckled at his antics. "Have you eaten?" he asked.

Jongwoo gave his stomach a light pat in response. At least Zhenya hadn't starved or mistreated him while Taekjoo was unconscious. In fact, when he thought about it, Zhenya was the one who had brought Jongwoo to this place and provided them a space to rest. Sure, the guy had terrible manners and an irritating personality, but maybe he did have some sense of loyalty.

"...Hard to figure that guy out."

"Sorry, what was that?"

"Nothing. Anyway, where are we? Still in Turkey?"

"No, we're in Greece now."

"Greece?"

"Yeah. When Zhenya brought you out, there was some fighting. Staying in Turkey would've led to complications. Who knows what kind of demands the authorities there might have made to sweep it under the rug."

"Right... And Matías—that guy's supposed to be the son of a Mexican drug lord, isn't he?"

"Yeah, Matías Perez. But how do you know him?"

“He said he helped me escape Cuba after a job. Apparently, he and Psych already knew each other, and he did it as a favor for her.”

"Oh... So that's why you were in Mexico back then."

Jongwoo nodded, as if the pieces of the puzzle were finally falling into place. Encouraged by this, he decided to dig a little deeper into the parts that had been nagging at him.

“That Psych—is it that guy from earlier?”

“Yeah. Mr. Yevgeny. That’s what people usually call him, apparently.”

“The Psych I know is supposed to be the third son of a pretty influential family in Russia. They say he’s got a real knack for weapon development and deals with the underground world to distribute them. He’s also tight with the mafia. Officially, though, I heard he’s a Russian government official. And with what you told me earlier, he’s now the Russian ambassador to South Korea and used to be some sort of one-man unit in the FSB. That all checks out?”

Jongwoo nodded enthusiastically, confirming Taekjoo’s suspicions. No matter how much Taekjoo thought about it, he couldn’t figure out why he would have gotten close to Zhenya. If his work had taken him to Russia, someone like Zhenya—a member of a powerful family and part of the FSB—would be an enemy, not an ally. He’d even heard that his initial misjudgment of Zhenya as a partner had nearly gotten him killed. And from what he could tell, Zhenya didn’t seem to have cut ties with his homeland or family, given his current position as ambassador.

When it came to work, Taekjoo had always kept his professional and personal lives strictly separate. He’d never formed personal connections with anyone he encountered on duty, let alone with someone who should have been his adversary. If that had somehow happened, it could only mean one thing.

“Wait—was I already acquainted with him before I went to Russia?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Jongwoo said firmly.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because back then, you told me to gather intel on Mr. Yevgeny. If you’d already known him, you wouldn’t have needed me to look into him.”

“Fair point.”

Piecing it all together, it seemed clear. Taekjoo hadn’t known Zhenya before his first mission in Russia. During that mission, he’d mistakenly partnered up with him and somehow survived a situation where Zhenya nearly killed him. Now, for reasons still unclear, they were close enough that Zhenya had even helped cover for him with his mother. But seriously—how could that even make sense? It was obvious he was still missing some critical piece of the puzzle.

“Why did I go to Russia back then?”

“It was to locate a weapon called *Anastasia*—a joint creation between North Korea and Russia.”

“Wait, *Anastasia*?”

“Yes. Remember when you asked me about *Anastasia* the other day? The only *Anastasia* I know is the last princess of Russia, or this weapon. I’ve never heard you mention any other *Anastasia*.”

Taekjoo had never been particularly moved by the tragic story of the last princess. That made it more likely that the *Anastasia* referenced in his tattoo referred to the weapon. For a brief moment, he wondered if he might’ve once had a lover named Anastasia, but he dismissed the thought immediately. He wasn’t the type to get someone’s name tattooed on his body. He knew that much about himself.

Still, even if *Anastasia* referred to the weapon, there were lingering questions. Why would he go so far as to have it tattooed on himself? Tattoos usually held deeply personal or significant meaning.

The more he thought about it, the less clarity he found. If anything, he only grew more frustrated. He realized this wasn’t a mystery he could solve in a day or two. For now, it made sense to set the puzzle aside and focus on more immediate matters.

“First things first... Have you reported to headquarters yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“Why not?”

“My phone’s broken.”

“But you’ve got a laptop, right?”

“I do, but there’s no internet here.”

“Damn it.”

What kind of place didn’t have internet in this day and age? Was it because Matias and Zhenya had so many things to hide? If they were going to be this secretive, they might as well dig a hole and live underground.

“Alright, then head out for a bit. There’s got to be an internet café somewhere in Greece. If you get in touch with the director, they’ll figure something out for us.”

“Ah...”

Yoon Jongwoo visibly flinched at the mention of Director Lim. His eyes darted sideways as he avoided meeting Taekjoo’s gaze.

“What’s going on?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Did something happen to the director?”

“Why? Did you remember something?”

“No. It’s just... your reaction is weird. And I had this unsettling dream about him recently.”

“Oh, really? That’s interesting.”

“Don’t dodge the question. Did something happen?”

“No, of course not! Nothing’s happened!”

Jongwoo waved his hands emphatically, almost too much so. For now, the matter of reporting to headquarters was set aside for later.

“Let’s hold off on contacting headquarters until you’re fully recovered. It’s not like they’re going to go out of their way to accommodate us. And with your leg like that, it’s not like you can jump into action right away anyway.”

Jongwoo had a point. Returning to the field immediately wasn’t realistic. Zhenya didn’t seem inclined to let them leave without a fight, and the National Intelligence Service wasn’t exactly known for risking unnecessary exposure to rescue two agents.

“Jongwoo, what’s your take on this?”

“On what?”

“That Yevgeny or whatever his name is. Do you think he’s trustworthy? He’s quick to resort to violence, and he sulks like a child over the smallest things. No matter how I think about it, I can’t imagine I’d willingly befriend someone like him. And honestly, just look at him…”

“Mr. Yevgeny is intimidating and unpredictable, sure. But, if it’s you we’re talking about, I don’t think you need to worry.”

"What's that supposed to mean, 'I don't need to worry'?"

"At the very least, he’s not someone who would do something bad to you, sir."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because if it weren’t for Mr. Yevgeny, we’d never have found you. Honestly, I thought you were gone for good, sir. The headquarters had practically given up on the search. But Mr. Yevgeny wouldn’t let it go. He did everything—no matter what it took—to find you."

When agents on covert missions face danger, the state or their agency often denies any association with them. It’s a sacrifice for the greater good, in the name of national security,

and Kwon Taek-joo didn’t particularly hold a grudge about it. Still, as Yoon Jong-woo had pointed out, it would’ve been impossible to locate him without outside help. Even Kwon himself had felt the limits of his own endurance while on the run. He’d constantly been on the move, surviving one close call after another. Surely, those pursuing him had faced similar challenges.

That’s why it felt even more unsettling. What on earth was so valuable about Kwon Taek-joo that Yevgeny had gone to such lengths? And even if Kwon had held the man’s life in his hands, was charging in with such boldness a normal reaction? Was Russia such an affectionate country that they disregarded gender and dished out physical contact like candy?

Frustrated with his unanswered questions, Kwon could only tug at his hair in irritation.

It was late at night, and he found himself unable to sleep. Eventually, he gave up trying and sat up in bed. Lying there, idle and confined, was unbearable. The more he thought, the more his head ached, and his chest felt heavy with anxiety.

He tossed the blanket aside and was about to get up when he hesitated. Yoon Jongwoo was sprawled out on the floor near his feet, fast asleep. No matter how many times Kwon Taekjoo told him to sleep in his own room, he wouldn’t listen. Was it because he was scared of Yevgeny? Or was he worried about Taekjoo himself?

"Hey. If you’re going to keep sleeping there, just get up on the bed."

"Mmm… I don’t want to make you uncomfortable, Sunbae."

Jongwoo mumbled, still half-asleep. Despite his words, he clumsily crawled onto the bed, pulling a pillow under his head and snugly tucking himself under the blanket. Before Taekjoo could say anything else, Jongwoo was already snoring softly, completely at ease. Taekjoo couldn’t help but marvel at the lack of caution in the younger man. Was it that kind of obliviousness that made him resilient to stress? Perhaps ignorance truly was bliss.

Groaning softly, he shifted toward the edge of the bed. His goal was the crutches leaning against the wall. The doctor had explicitly told him not to move unnecessarily, but lying down for so long had made his back ache. He wasn’t paralyzed from the waist down, and there was no way he was going to deal with bodily functions while stuck in bed.

With some effort, he grabbed the crutches and pulled himself upright. He’d been on crutches more times than he cared to count, so keeping his balance wasn’t a challenge. Most of the pain had subsided, leaving only the annoyance of being unable to move as freely and quickly as he wanted.

After a slow, deliberate trek, he finally reached the window. Pulling the curtains aside, he was met with complete darkness outside. Not a single building or structure broke the pitch-black view. Once daylight came, though, he’d likely have an unobstructed view of the blue Mediterranean Sea. That also meant this place was perched atop a sheer cliff.

Sighing, he turned and hobbled toward the bathroom. The high ceiling and marble floors amplified the sound of every step he took, the echoes trailing him like a shadow.

Reaching the bathroom felt like an achievement in itself, and he paused to catch his breath. Despite the short distance, his back was already damp with sweat. Groping along the wall, he flipped on the light, only to let out a frustrated groan. The toilet was still a considerable distance away, past the sink, the bathtub, and the shower. By the time he finally got there, his entire body felt sticky.

“Damn place is too big.”

Grumbling, he started pulling down his pants. But with one hand on the crutches and an awkward posture, it wasn’t easy. He wiggled and fidgeted, barely managing to lower his underwear halfway, when a familiar smell wafted through the air—a distinctive cigar scent.

Turning his head sharply, he spotted Zhenya standing in the bathroom doorway. When had he even gotten there? The man moved like a ghost, completely silent and impossible to detect. Caught in such an embarrassing position, Taekjoo scowled and barked, “What are you doing here?”

“What does it look like?”

“I’m here to take a piss, obviously. Get out.”

“Since when are you shy? You use public restrooms all the time.”

“It’s not about being shy, dumbass. It’s about not subjecting you to this disgusting sight. Now get lost!”

"I didn’t know you thought so highly of me."

It was something Taekjoo had noticed before—every time he spoke with Zhenya, the conversation left him feeling stifled. It wasn’t just that they talked past each other; it was that Zhenya had a remarkable talent for twisting things in bizarre directions. Even now, Zhenya was tilting his head slightly, wearing a smug, oddly satisfied expression, as if Taekjoo had just paid him the highest compliment.

"Look around all you want then."

Taekjoo muttered, giving up on the back-and-forth. He tried to focus on the task at hand—or rather, his bladder. But before he could make much progress, a faint, familiar scent grew stronger, and a shadow loomed behind him. Alarmed, he turned his head slightly. Sure enough, Zhenya was standing right behind him. Did he really take that sarcastic comment literally? Or worse, was he just messing with him, trying to enjoy Taekjoo’s discomfort? Damn Russian.

He decided to stubbornly concentrate on what he was doing in order to not get more involved. However, perhaps as a result of the tension, his urine was not flowing as it should.

"What the hell?"

He tried lightly massaging his penis, convinced something was physically wrong. A tingling sensation was coming up from inside, but his piss was still coming out in small drops. Was his kidney or bladder damaged during the injury? Had the anesthesia from his earlier treatment caused complications?

The thought of needing a catheter sent a shiver down his spine. His past hospital stays flashed through his mind, and his anxiety grew. But just as he was spiraling, a pale hand flashed in his peripheral vision. Before he could process it, Zhenya's large frame pressed against his back, and a familiar weight settled on his shoulder. Taekjoo turned his head sharply, locking eyes with Zhenya's bright blue irises. What was he doing? No way. Taekjoo tried to turn his body, but Zhenya's hand had already grabbed his cock.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Helping."

"Don't!"

"You can't even stand properly. Stop being stubborn."

Whether it was the unfamiliar warmth or the sheer fact it wasn't his own hand, Taekjoo couldn't help but react. The sensitivity in his cock became much more intense. Even though Zhenya was only holding it gently, a prickling sensation ran up the back of his neck, and goosebumps rose unbidden on his cheeks.

"Let go."

"Shh. You don't want your junior waking up, do you?"

The thought of Jongwoo, peacefully sleeping in the other room, flashed through Taekjoo's mind. If they made too much noise, even someone as oblivious as Jongwoo would wake up. Taekjoo simply couldn't show his junior the sight of being weirdly glued to a man.

Taekjoo bit down on his lower lip, gripping Zhenya's wrist in an attempt to pull his hand away. But Zhenya was undeterred. He pulled Taekjoo closer, pressing his chin against Taekjoo's shoulder to hold him in place, while his other hand firmly continued to stimulate his cock. A tight, almost unbearable pressure built within Taekjoo, and finally, with a soft trickling sound, relief began to flow. The mix of release and lingering discomfort brought an involuntary moan to his lips.

"...Hngh."

Zhenya gently caressed and stimulated Kwon Taekjoo's genitals. Not that he wanted anyone else to touch his body like that, but despite wanting to push Zhenya's hand away, he feared his pee might splash everywhere. There was also a big part of him that didn't want to give up the pleasurable sensation that came over him, so intense that he felt it numbed his entire pelvis.

His ears burned with humiliation, and the thought crossed his mind: **Would it have been better to ask Jongwoo for help?** Or maybe, just maybe, he should have opted for the catheter. The regret came too late, and he silently cursed himself.

As the stream finally dwindled to a stop, Taekjoo felt an inexplicable pang of disappointment. The realization horrified him, and he stiffened. Had Zhenya noticed? A soft chuckle brushed past Taekjoo's ear, followed by the warmth of Zhenya's tongue running along its edge.

"Should I help you some more?"

What? In a moment of disbelief, the inside of Kwon Taekjoo's cock began to throb uncontrollably.

"No. Get lost."

Still, his body betrayed him, reacting faintly despite his best efforts to ignore it. He hurriedly pulled up his pants and turned toward the sink. Bracing himself against the counter with his crutch, he scrubbed his hands furiously, trying to wash away both the physical and emotional residue of the encounter. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Zhenya standing motionless. Curious, Taekjoo glanced at the mirror, only to find Zhenya staring at his own hand, seemingly lost in thought. The sight made Taekjoo's face burn anew.

"Ugh, seriously. What are you staring at now? Just wash your hands already."

Zhenya moved toward the sink at an infuriatingly leisurely pace, as if deliberately testing Taekjoo's nerves. Unable to bear it any longer, Taekjoo grabbed his hand and pulled him forward. He began scrubbing Zhenya's hands vigorously with soap, working meticulously to clean between each finger.

As he worked, he couldn't shake off the weight of Zhenya's unwavering gaze. Taekjoo glanced sideways, only to meet those piercing blue eyes again, staring at him as if trying to unravel his very soul.

Yet, something was different this time. The sharpness from before seemed absent. Instead, Zhenya followed Taekjoo's lead, obediently letting him scrub his hands clean. The submissive demeanor felt strange—out of place even—and made Taekjoo uncomfortable in a way he couldn't quite explain. In those vivid blue eyes, now focused entirely on him, there was an unyielding sincerity, almost blind devotion. Taekjoo's heart wavered for a moment, guilt creeping in.

After turning off the water, Taekjoo kept staring at Zhenya's hands, hesitating.

"Look, I'm sorry. But I don't remember you. Not at all."

Zhenya's eyes widened slightly in surprise. Taekjoo continued as he dried Zhenya's hands with a towel.

"I don't remember what I promised you, or what you meant to me. Even if you keep blaming me, I can't truly reflect on it because... I don't even know what I did wrong. So, just—wait.

When I get my memory back, we can deal with it then. If I really messed up, I'll take whatever you throw at me. Hell, I'll even let you hit me until you feel better."

He looked at Zhenya for affirmation, but the man responded with a faint, incredulous smirk, shaking his head slightly.

"What? I said I'll do my best to remember. Isn't that worth something? Do you have to laugh at me for that?"

"Taekjoo. Have you forgotten this too? You've never been trustworthy."

Untrustworthy? Him? He'd never heard anyone call him that in his life. When had he ever been unreliable? Was it something he'd become over his years at the NIS?

"I can't take your word at face value."

Zhenya added flatly. Before Taekjoo could respond, Zhenya abruptly cupped his face, the suddenness of the gesture startling him. Taekjoo tried to pull away, but Zhenya's grip was firm and unyielding.

Instead, Zhenya leaned in closer, studying Taekjoo's face as if searching for something buried deep beneath the surface. His striking features came so close that Taekjoo felt the warmth of his breath against his skin. The proximity left Taekjoo frozen, breath caught in his chest. For a fleeting moment, he forgot the situation entirely, staring back at Zhenya in stunned silence.

The next moment, Zhenya's face moved even closer, and suddenly, his lips pressed firmly against Taekjoo's. Along with it came the overwhelming intensity of Zhenya's scent. Taekjoo's heart pounded violently in his chest, perhaps from sheer shock. He clenched his lips tightly, refusing to yield, but Zhenya's tongue trailed across his lips and up to his cheek. With disgust, Taekjoo pulled his face away.

"What the hell are you doing, you crazy bastard?"

"You don't get it, do you? It's frustrating and confusing, right? I feel the same. So, put up with at least this much."

Zhenya said, his tone almost petulant, like a child throwing a tantrum. He smeared his thumb across Taekjoo's lower lip before releasing him and abruptly turning away to leave the bathroom. Taekjoo, still in disbelief, shouted after him,

"Hey! So, what's your plan, huh? Are you just going to keep acting like this? Hey, you idiot!"

Zhenya ignored him and disappeared without a word. Taekjoo grabbed a towel and hurled it at his retreating back, but it fluttered to the floor well before reaching him. That enigmatic man, always choosing the most bewildering actions, left Taekjoo feeling infuriated and helpless. His heart pounded erratically, and he told himself it was purely out of frustration.

In the mirror, Taekjoo's flushed face stared back at him. Irritated, he swiped a wet hand across the glass, smearing water over his reflection.

Suddenly, tiny white fragments seemed to fall into an unseen surface below, scattering and sinking slowly. He leaned closer, noticing smooth fingernails attached to the pieces.

Fingers?

His eyes snapped open, and an image came into view—a photograph illuminated by a focused beam of light, the rest of the surroundings fading into shadow. The photo depicted a corpse draped in white cloth. Its swollen fingers were grotesquely missing their first knuckles.

"Dominic Morgan. A top operative sent by U.S. intelligence to Russia. Four days ago, his body was found along the riverbank. At the time, he was working a solo mission to uncover Anastasia's identity."

A familiar voice echoed somewhere in his mind. At the same time, fleeting memories of Dominic Morgan's face in life surfaced briefly before dissolving again.

"Take Morgan's place and find Anastasia."

The surroundings gradually brightened, as if lanterns were lighting up one by one. First, the entire desk where the photograph rested became visible, then the figure of Director Lim seated behind it, and finally, the familiar scene of his office unfolded fully before Taekjoo's eyes.

Director Lim casually tossed a passport onto the desk. It was a Japanese passport. Taekjoo picked it up and flipped it open to examine the personal details inside.

"Sakamoto Hiro?"

"A contract has reportedly been signed between a Japanese energy company and Gazprom, Russia's state-owned gas corporation, for the construction of an LNG facility. Word has it that Itochu, an international trading company, played a significant role in brokering the deal. Sakamoto Hiro is their regional officer for Europe."

The mission was clear: uncover the identity of *Anastasia*, a joint creation of Russia and North Korea—an unprecedentedly powerful weapon. The assignment didn't sit well with Taekjoo. Russia wasn't a region he was intimately familiar with, and the complexity of the task felt daunting. Still, he couldn't bring himself to outright refuse.

Someone had to do it, after all. Up to this point, every mission assigned to him had been completed with unwavering success. Feeling out of his depth wasn't a valid excuse to back away. If anything, it might turn into an exciting and unusual adventure.

"One thing to keep in mind: Psych Bogdanov."

Director Lim's tone turned particularly stern as he issued the warning.

"If you want access to Russia's power players, you won't be able to avoid crossing paths with him. But steer clear of him as much as possible. If you do encounter him, don't engage."

Taekjoo didn’t dismiss the advice. Still, he couldn’t help but be a little curious about the man known more by the nickname *Psych* than his actual name. That curiosity, however, wouldn’t cloud his judgment or interfere with the mission.

"Don’t get yourself killed."

With that final parting remark, Taekjoo left Director Lim’s office.

The scene shifted abruptly. The passing scenery outside the car window, coupled with the distinctive signs and lettering, made it clear where he was. Moscow. The car weaved its way out of the congested main roads and slipped into a narrow alley.

Where are we going?

The question barely had time to form in his mind when the car suddenly came to a stop. A second later, bullets rained down from every direction.

He bolted through the door to escape the ambush, leaving no time to figure out who was after him or why. No matter how far he ran or how hard he tried to shake them off, his pursuers stayed relentlessly on his trail.

After what felt like an eternity of fleeing, he ducked into an abandoned building. The assailants arrived not long after, leaving him cornered like a rat in a trap. Pressing his back against a pillar, he racked his brain for an escape plan.

The gunfire, which had been ceaseless up to that point, suddenly stopped. The abrupt silence was unnerving. Cautiously, he peered out to observe the scene below. Bodies of the attackers were strewn across the area, motionless. The surrounding air was eerily still.

What’s going on? Had someone else intervened? If so, were they an ally or another foe?

Before he could make sense of the situation, a sharp alarm blared in his mind. His shadow was suddenly consumed by something much larger. Danger. Instinctively, he prepared to strike first, but his arm was twisted, and his face was slammed onto the ground in one swift move. It was the first time he’d been subdued so quickly and completely. Shocked by the unexpected turn of events, his body froze, unable to react.

From his inverted view, he caught sight of a pair of pointed crocodile leather shoes. The sharp scent of a cigar filled the air, strong enough to sting his nostrils. He knew that smell—and the cold, oppressive aura that seemed to suffocate the atmosphere around it.

"A bit of filth seems to have landed on my shoes. Care to remove it for me?"

"...Psych?"

The name escaped his lips involuntarily, and his eyes snapped open.

Next to him, Yoon Jongwoo stirred. "What? Did you say something?"

Still groggy, Taekjoo blinked in confusion, struggling to differentiate between dream and reality. "Huh?" he muttered, only for Yoon Jongwoo to repeat, "What did you say?" The absurd back-and-forth made them seem like a comedy duo.

The room was already bathed in sunlight. Morning had come again. Taekjoo sat up, shaking his head as if to clear the remnants of the dream.

"I had a strange dream."

It had been so vivid that it felt real, yet he couldn't determine if it was a memory of something that had truly happened. Could *Zhenya* really have committed such brutality? If he really was Psych, a man tied to the mafia, it wouldn't be surprising if he killed without hesitation. And yet, Taekjoo found it hard to believe. *Was it because Zhenya, in his own way, had shown kindness to him?*

The way Zhenya acted toward Yoon Jongwoo was exactly what one would expect from someone nicknamed "Psych." Yet, when it came to Taekjoo himself, the man didn't lay a finger on him and instead behaved in an almost endearing manner.

"Hey, about Yevgeny…"

Taekjoo began, hoping to get some answers from Yoon Jongwoo. But before he could continue, a shift in the atmosphere made him instinctively glance toward the door. There, leaning casually against the frame, was Zhenya.

"Ahh!"

"Ahh!"

Taekjoo yelped and Yoon Jongwoo echoed, clutching his shoulders as if Zhenya's sudden appearance might actually harm him. Zhenya gave them both a look of utter disdain.

"What the hell?! You scared me! At least make some noise when you show up!"

"Were you two sharing some big secret?"

Zhenya retorted, his gaze sharp as it lingered on Taekjoo before shifting to Yoon Jongwoo with evident displeasure. Caught under Zhenya's accusing stare, Yoon Jongwoo shrank a little and quickly averted his eyes. Despite being the same age, Zhenya treated Yoon Jongwoo as though he were utterly beneath him. It was almost childish—the sulky possessiveness of someone afraid his best friend was being stolen.

"What do you want?" Taekjoo asked, redirecting the man's attention to himself.

"If you're awake, you should eat."

"I'll eat later, on my own—"

Taekjoo began, feeling too awkward to sit and have a meal together. Before he could finish, a loud growl erupted from Yoon Jongwoo's stomach. Startled, Yoon Jongwoo clutched his

abdomen as if trying to muffle the sound, but his body betrayed him with an even louder, more defiant rumble. It suddenly dawned on Taekjoo that he hadn't checked whether his junior had been eating properly or sleeping well while caring for him. Was Yoon Jongwoo making do on scraps because he felt obligated to stay by his side? Some Sunbae he was.

"Yoon Jongwoo, at least *you* should go eat."

"Me? By myself? What about you, Sunbae?"

"I just woke up. I'm not hungry."

He wasn't wrong—having just woken up, Taekjoo wasn't feeling particularly hungry. After a restless night filled with strange dreams, he had planned to quietly gather his thoughts alone. At least, that had been his plan until his stomach let out an unmistakable growl. Did Zhenya hear that? Taekjoo shot a cautious glance in his direction, only to catch the man sighing audibly, not bothering to hide his irritation.

"Seriously? Can you stop embarrassing yourself already? My patience for this stupidity has limits."

Zhenya snapped before turning on his heel. Taekjoo glared daggers at the back of Zhenya's head.

"Hey! That jerk... Does he always talk like such an arrogant ass?"

"Not so much arrogant as terrifying."

"Terrifying? Please. He's just some smug little punk who gets off on looking down on people. A pretty face doesn't excuse that rotten attitude."

"It's amazing you even notice his face. I don't think I've ever gotten a proper look at it."

"Stop selling yourself short, idiot. Guys like him act all high and mighty because people like you cower over nothing. Stand your ground, for once."

"Maybe ignorance really *is* courage."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Forget I said it. Anyway, let's stop standing around and get something to eat. You'll recover faster if you build up your strength. Want me to grab the wheelchair for you?"

"No need. Lying around all day has me feeling stiff. I need to start rehab anyway, and I can handle this pain. I'll power through it."

Yoon Jongwoo shook his head, exasperated by Taekjoo's stubbornness. He handed over a crutch, and Taekjoo quickly adjusted to using it, his natural athleticism and adaptability unaffected by his recent memory loss.

The two had just stepped out of the bedroom when something made them both freeze.

"...Wait, is that...?"

Taekjoo sniffed the air, and Yoon Jongwoo followed suit, his nose twitching as he tracked the source of the aroma. Yoon Jongwoo pointed toward the kitchen. Taekjoo had already taken off, moving faster than he had at any point since the accident.

When the two of them arrived at the kitchen, Zhenya was standing at the counter. The source of the irresistible aroma was clear: the pot in front of him. Without realizing it, Taekjoo found himself drifting closer. Zhenya glanced briefly at him, now standing inches away, before turning his attention back to the pot. Inside, the red, spicy broth of Korean ramen was bubbling vigorously, its rich scent filling the room. Taekjoo's mouth watered uncontrollably, and no matter how many times he swallowed, the saliva just kept coming.

"Where did you get this? Do you even eat stuff like this?"

Taekjoo asked, eyes glued to the pot. Zhenya didn't bother answering, instead letting out a dismissive snort. On any other day, that attitude would have annoyed him, but right now, under the spell of the intoxicating smell, Taekjoo couldn't care less.

When the noodles reached the perfect al dente texture, Zhenya turned off the heat. He gestured toward the table with a tilt of his head, signaling Taekjoo to sit. Without protest, Taekjoo obeyed and sat in the indicated spot, his gaze never leaving the steaming pot. Zhenya carried it over and set it in front of him. Jongwoo, just as mesmerized, quietly slid into the seat beside him.

The two men were utterly captivated by the glorious sight and aroma of the ramen, whispering in hushed tones.

"This is definitely meant for me, right?"

"Yes, I think so, Sunbae. It smells incredible."

"You, idiot. How many times have I told you—when you're a National Intelligence Service agent, you don't just eat food given to you by strangers without questioning it?"

"But it smells this good! Besides, Mr. Yevgeny isn't a stranger—he's only unfamiliar because you lost your memory. You two were close, remember?"

"You're sure about that?"

"Yes! Absolutely. Look, if you don't eat it now, the noodles will get soggy."

Jongwoo's urgent plea was sweeter than any encouragement or praise. Taekjoo swallowed hard, glancing at Zhenya's face. The man gave a slight nod, silently urging him to eat. There was no reason to hesitate anymore. Picking up the fork provided, Taekjoo twirled a bundle of noodles and quickly brought it to his mouth before it could slip away. The moment the first bite hit his tongue, it was as if life itself had poured into him. His eyes brightened, and his sluggish mind cleared, as though fresh energy surged through his veins.

"Well? How is it, Sunbae? How does it taste?"

Jongwoo asked anxiously, barely containing his excitement. Taekjoo, still savoring the broth, took a single sip before wordlessly pushing the pot toward Jongwoo. Like a starved animal, Jongwoo dove in eagerly, scooping up a bundle of noodles with confidence. But just as he was about to take a bite, he froze. His face turned pale, and his enthusiasm vanished in an instant.

“Why aren’t you eating? Seriously, this stuff is amazing.”

“No, it’s fine. You should eat more, senior. You need to recover quickly.”

“What kind of nonsense is that to say while tearing up…?”

Taekjoo trailed off and looked up, suspicious. There stood Zhenya, arms crossed and glaring daggers at Jongwoo, as if he’d kill him on the spot if he dared eat another bite. The tension was palpable, as though Jongwoo would choke on the noodles before swallowing a single strand. With a resigned sigh, Jongwoo set his fork down and withdrew quietly, though not without a longing glance at the ramen.

“Hey, don’t be stingy about food. How much could this even cost?”

Zhenya clicked his tongue, seemingly unimpressed, and grabbed another packet of ramen from the pile on the counter. He handed it to Jongwoo and gestured toward the stove, as if saying he needed to cook it himself.

“I’ll just eat it like this.”

Jongwoo clearly didn’t dare approach the stove with Zhenya looming nearby. Instead, he broke the uncooked noodles in half and started crunching on them dry. The moment he tasted the seasoning packet, a blissful expression spread across his face, as though he’d just discovered culinary nirvana. Zhenya, on the other hand, looked at him like he was witnessing some bizarre alien ritual, his brow furrowing in disbelief.

Has he never seen anyone eat dry ramen before? Maybe he thinks food isn’t food unless it’s perfectly prepared. Taekjoo shook his head at the thought. These aristocratic types, always so particular.

“Hey, why aren’t you eating? Want a bite of this?”

“That’s not food. It’s closer to a biochemical weapon.”

Zhenya replied firmly—a biochemical attack? Did he not like spicy food? If that were the case, it would be weird.

“Funny, considering you made this. And it’s damn good, too.”

“Because you like it.”

“Me? It’s not like I’m obsessed with ramen or anything.”

Ramen had always been just a convenient, quick meal for Taekjoo, something to eat when he needed to fill his stomach in a hurry—usually while abroad. In Korea, he typically ate the meals his mother prepared or dined out, but ramen was rarely ever on the menu when eating out.

Zhenya, however, didn't buy it.

"You're never honest. The moment you see ramen, your eyes light up like a kid in a candy store."

Every time? Had he embarrassed himself over ramen before? The question lingered briefly before he shrugged it off and refocused on finishing the meal in front of him. Before long, the bowl was empty—down to the very last drop of broth. As his stomach filled and the spicy warmth settled inside, he couldn't help but feel his spirits lift.

"That hit the spot. Thanks, Yevgeny."

"It's Zhenya ."

Zhenya corrected him sharply, a hint of irritation in his voice. Taekjoo raised an eyebrow. Wasn't Zhenya's full name "Yevgeny"? Jongwoo called him that earlier, so what was the big deal? Surely being addressed by his real name was better than being called *Psych*.

Leaning toward Jongwoo, Taekjoo whispered conspiratorially.

"Hey, why does he get annoyed when I call him Yevgeny? That *is* his name, right?"

"It is. But you've always called him Zhenya."

"Zhenya?"

"Yeah, it's his nickname."

"Nick...name?"

The idea seemed ridiculous. Jongwoo must've been distracted by the ramen and spouted nonsense, right? Sure, nicknames were common in the West, especially among close friends. But him? Calling Zhenya—a grown man with a sharp, intimidating presence—by a nickname? It didn't seem like something he'd do, no matter how close they might've been. It felt far too sentimental and silly.

"When are you going to stop whispering and clinging to each other like that?"

Zhenya suddenly interjected, his tone laced with irritation. Snapped back to reality, Taekjoo realized he and Jongwoo had their heads practically pressed together as they whispered. It wasn't as if they were sharing some great secret, but Zhenya's expression screamed jealousy.

At that moment, the blaring of a car horn echoed from somewhere outside. All three of them flinched and instinctively turned to look toward the window. *Who could it be?* Judging by Zhenya's expression, it didn't seem like they were expecting any visitors.

The horn honked again, this time in rapid succession, the sound sharp and grating. The tense noise set everyone on edge, their senses heightened. Zhenya's face darkened instantly, and without a word, he strode purposefully toward the window. Without thinking, Taekjoo grabbed Zhenya by the arm.

"Hey, that could be dangerous! You don't even know who it is. Don't just go looking out like that!"

Zhenya glanced down at the hand gripping his arm, his expression unreadable. His reaction was as if Taekjoo's concern was something alien or unexpected. Was he overreacting? Zhenya wasn't a child, after all.

Feeling awkward, Taekjoo was about to release his hold when suddenly, a deafening crash reverberated through the air. It was the kind of noise that could only come from something heavy colliding with a solid barrier. Zhenya immediately moved closer to the window, ignoring Taekjoo's earlier warning. With a quick motion, he pulled the curtain aside and peeked outside. His eyes narrowed at the scene before him.

The crashing sounds didn't stop; they came in rhythmic, jarring intervals, each one amplifying the tension in the room. After taking a moment to assess the situation, Zhenya let the curtain fall back into place and walked briskly toward the front entrance without offering any explanation. Sensing danger, Taekjoo and Jongwoo hurried after him.

Reaching the front hall, Zhenya retrieved a rifle mounted on the wall and loaded it in a single, fluid motion. Without hesitation, he threw open the door and pointed the barrel toward the commotion outside. Only then could Taekjoo and Jongwoo make sense of the noise. A white Rolls-Royce was ramming the front gate repeatedly, inching its way forward with each violent impact.

Just as Zhenya steadied his aim and prepared to pull the trigger, Jongwoo lunged toward him, arms outstretched.

"Mr. Yevgeny, no! Don't shoot! It's Olga! It's Olga!"

Zhenya barely glanced at Jongwoo as he tried to shove him aside, undeterred. The rifle remained firmly trained on the Rolls-Royce, which was now fully smashing through the gate, its hood crumpled and headlights shattered.

Olga? The name sounded familiar to Kwon Taekjoo, but he could not remember where he knew it from.

The car roared down the driveway at breakneck speed, barreling toward the house with reckless abandon. It seemed unstoppable, as if it would plow through anything in its way. Equally resolute, Zhenya stood his ground, his posture taut and unwavering, finger on the trigger. Jongwoo, on the other hand, was near panic, repeatedly crying out, **"No! Stop! Don't!"** as he frantically tried to reason with him.

At last, the car screeched to a stop right in front of the gate. A moment later, the driver's side door opened, and with a loud *snap*, an umbrella unfurled. Taekjoo's eyes were fixed on the

figure stepping out of the car, now holding the umbrella. It was a woman—confident and composed, as if she didn't have a rifle pointed at her.

"It's been a while, everyone."

Ignoring the weapon aimed at her, she strolled leisurely up the steps. As she passed, she flashed a polite smile at Jongwoo, who was still desperately trying to hold Zhenya back. **"How have you been?"** she asked him casually. Jongwoo's distressed expression instantly softened, almost melting into a goofy grin.

"I've been great! And you, Miss Olga? Everything good?"

If he had a tail, it would've been wagging furiously. Zhenya, meanwhile, was far less amused. With a quick jerk, he shook Jongwoo off and once again raised the barrel of the rifle, this time shoving it even closer to Olga's face.

"What do you want here?"

"I heard Taekjoo was here."

Zhenya's gaze immediately darted to Jongwoo, who quickly averted his eyes, guilt written all over his face.

"Take her and leave. Before I decide to shoot."

His finger twitched on the trigger, pulling it dangerously close to the breaking point. Jongwoo looked like he was about to faint from the stress, sweat pouring down his face. Olga, in stark contrast, remained utterly unfazed.

"And who are you to order me around? I'm not here for you. I came to see Taekjoo."

Hearing his name brought up again, Taekjoo couldn't remain silent. Leaning on his crutches, he made his way to Zhenya's side. The movement caught Zhenya's attention, momentarily breaking his focus. He glanced at Taekjoo, a flicker of concern crossing his face. Olga, noticing Taekjoo as well, greeted him with a casual wave.

"Taekjoo, so you're alive after all."

"You know me?"

"Of course. It's me—Olga. Olga Vissarionovna Bogdanov."

She leaned in close, her gaze sparkling with a teasing edge. It was as if she were challenging him to admit that he couldn't possibly have forgotten someone as striking as her. Taekjoo, however, only frowned harder.

"Bogdanov? Wait… Are you related to *him*?"

"Yes, that's right, Sunbae. Miss Olga is Mr. Yevgeny's younger and only sister."

Jongwoo interjected. Taekjoo gave Olga a skeptical once-over, his eyes narrowing.

“She doesn’t look anything like him.”

“Thanks for the compliment.”

Olga replied with a sly smile, clearly pleased. How was that a compliment? Taekjoo wanted to argue, but Olga didn’t give him the chance. Instead, she slipped her arm through his without hesitation.

“Let’s go inside and have some tea first, shall we?”

Before she could take a step, the cold barrel of Zhenya’s rifle pressed against the back of her head.

“Who said you could?”

Zhenya growled. Jongwoo let out a panicked squeak, his face going pale. While the tension could have easily escalated to bloodshed, Olga only sighed, exasperated rather than scared. It was clear someone needed to step in. Taekjoo raised a hand, covering the barrel of Zhenya’s rifle.

“Hey. Isn’t she your sister?”

“I’ve never thought of her that way.”

“Oh, come on. Blood relations don’t just disappear because you choose to deny them. Do I really need to explain that to you?”

Taekjoo’s voice was dripping with disbelief, as though lecturing an obstinate child. Strangely, that seemed to work. Zhenya’s sharp expression softened slightly, and the rifle tilted downward.

“What’s with you? Why the sudden shift?”

“Is your memory… coming back, Taekjoo?

“What?”

Taekjoo frowned, confused by the abrupt question. Zhenya also tilted his head, his face equally puzzled. Before things could spiral further, Jongwoo stepped in with an awkward laugh, trying to lighten the mood.

“Why don’t we all head inside? Like Olga said, let’s have some tea and talk things out calmly!”

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

“Let’s go, Taekjoo.”

“Ugh, let go of my arm.”

“No need to be shy. I’ll help you.”

“It’s not shyness, it’s refusal. You’re in my way, so let go. I can walk faster by myself.”

Taekjoo forcibly pulled his arm free from Olga’s grip and gestured for her to lead the way. With a shrug that suggested she was used to such resistance, Olga stepped forward. Jongwoo, ever eager to please, guided her inside with a bright, “This way!” Taekjoo was about to follow when he noticed Zhenya lagging behind, unmoving.

“What are you doing? Hurry up.”

Zhenya, still holding the rifle, seemed caught in thought. Only after a moment did he lower the weapon, placing it down before quietly joining Taekjoo. For someone who usually acted on his own terms, Zhenya was oddly compliant this time. Whenever Taekjoo glanced back, Zhenya’s gaze was fixed firmly on him. The intensity of those eyes brought an unsettling question to mind: *What kind of relationship did we have, exactly?*

By the time they reached the kitchen, Jongwoo was already boiling water for tea. Olga was seated at the table, idly toying with a piece of fruit in front of her.

“Miss Olga, that fruit’s really refreshing and sweet. You must be tired from the trip. Would you like to try one?”

“Hmm... The peel’s a bit tough, though.”

“Oh! I can peel it for you!”

Jongwoo exclaimed, grabbing a knife and diving into the task with fervor. He looked more like a servant doting on a high-class lady than someone entertaining a guest. The way Jongwoo openly doted on Olga, and how Olga seemed perfectly content to let him, was an annoyance Taekjoo couldn’t ignore.

“So, why’d you call her here?”

Zhenya pressed, his question making Jongwoo’s hands visibly slow, his movements suddenly hesitant as if buffering.

“You’d better have a good reason.”

“Yeah, why *did* you invite her? It doesn’t look like the homeowner’s too thrilled about it.”

“That… that’s because… I thought it might help you regain your memories, Sunbae. Miss Olga’s been really worried about you all this time. Plus, she knows more about how you got tangled up with Zhenya in Russia than I ever could.”

Jongwoo stammered, his words tumbling out like an excuse. Olga nodded along enthusiastically, backing up his claim.

“Restoring your lost memories should be our top priority, right? That’s going to require a well-rounded approach. From what I hear, Taekjoo doesn’t seem to remember a thing about this guy. So tell me, did you two end up fighting while I was gone?”

She said, pointing her fork between Zhenya and Taekjoo. Her casual tone caught Taekjoo off guard. How could she tell? The way her words hit home left him speechless, while Zhenya’s gaze turned even icier. Jongwoo, trying to make himself invisible, simply placed the freshly peeled apple into a dish and slid it toward Olga, who stabbed a piece with her fork and took a bite.

“Figures,” she said with a knowing smirk.

“Aren’t you curious? Don’t you want to know what kind of relationship you had with *him*?”

“I heard we were enemies for a while and then became friends.”

“ Friends? ”

Olga’s eyes widened in mock astonishment before she burst out laughing. The unexpected reaction left him flustered. So they weren’t friends? If that were true, why had he let Zhenya into his house, introduced him to his mother, and kept him around? Had his mother been some sort of hostage to keep Taekjoo in line, a pawn in Zhenya’s schemes? The unsettling thought spiraled, growing more vivid with each passing second.

Unable to bear the mounting unease, Taekjoo snapped.

“So? If we weren’t friends, what *were* we?”

“Well… I’m not sure if I should tell you. The truth might be a bit much for the current you to handle.”

Was this some Russian trait, to always talk in riddles? Between Zhenya and Olga, no one ever gave him a straight answer.

“Have you seen a doctor yet?”

“If you mean a regular doctor, they came when I was unconscious.”

Taekjoo replied, glancing toward Jongwoo for confirmation. Olga shook her head.

“No, not that kind. I meant a psychiatrist.”

“A psychiatrist? Who’s got time for that? I’m lucky just to be alive right now.”

“Judging by how you’re holding up, I can see that.”

Olga quipped, her tone sharp enough to cut. The biting sarcasm had to be a family trait; both she and Zhenya exuded the same irritating smugness. What kind of person had Taekjoo been

in the past to have gotten tangled up with people like this? The question gnawed at him, leaving him simmering with frustration.

“Then it’s settled. You’ll see a specialist for an evaluation, and we’ll figure out how to move forward from there.”

Olga said decisively, ignoring any objections. Her tone left no room for argument, as if Taekjoo’s consent were merely a formality she could afford to skip.

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Chapter End Notes

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Until It's Done

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Later that afternoon, a psychiatrist arrived to assess Taekjoo. Given the clarity of his consciousness, the doctor requested to speak with him alone, aiming to gain a more thorough understanding of his condition without interference from others.

However, Zhenya flatly rejected this request, remaining firmly planted by the window with his arms crossed.

Concerned Zhenya might disrupt the session, Olga and Jongwoo decided to step back and observe from a distance. With everyone's attention fixed on the psychiatrist, Taekjoo provided a brief summary of his situation: being caught in a terrorist attack while on a work assignment in Iran, suffering a head injury, and waking up with no recollection of even his own name.

The doctor listened intently, nodding as he offered an explanation in a calm, assured tone.

"You've likely heard of *dissociative amnesia* before. It can occur after a traumatic brain injury or intense psychological stress. In your case, the head injury during the terrorist attack seems to have triggered it. Based on your account of waking up unable to recall your name, occupation, or why you were there, this falls under the category of generalized amnesia—a rare and severe form of memory loss. In such cases, patients often forget not only who they are but also where they've been, who they've interacted with, what they've done, what thoughts they've had, and even what emotions they've experienced."

The explanation aligned with Taekjoo's own suspicions, though he still found the diagnosis disorienting. He had heard of fellow agents losing memories—or worse, suffering cognitive

impairment—after severe head injuries, but the idea of experiencing something similar himself felt surreal.

“Generalized amnesia like yours is extremely rare. It’s most commonly seen in individuals who have undergone extreme trauma—witnessing horrific accidents, experiencing war, or being victims of violent crimes like sexual assault. Because of this, there are some crucial precautions for both you and your caretakers to keep in mind.”

As he spoke, the doctor’s gaze shifted meaningfully between Zhenya, Olga, and Jongwoo, addressing them as “caretakers,” a title that felt oddly formal and exaggerated under the circumstances.

“Patients with dissociative amnesia are at a higher risk of developing PTSD if they suddenly recall the event that caused their memory loss or encounter a situation that mirrors it. Even if the specific memory of the event remains inaccessible, it can still influence their behavior. For instance, someone who was mugged in an underground parking lot may not recall the incident in detail but could develop a deep aversion to entering similar spaces. This is a defense mechanism designed to protect them from further stress.

While recovering lost memories is important, the process must be approached carefully to avoid triggering PTSD. It’s crucial not to rush the patient into remembering too quickly or forcefully.”

The doctor’s warning left the room heavy with a mix of tension and reflection. Taekjoo glanced at Zhenya, then at Olga. Their expressions betrayed nothing, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that the weight of his lost memories was bearing down on everyone present.

As if on cue, Olga and Jongwoo’s gazes simultaneously shifted toward Zhenya. Despite their accusatory stares, Zhenya remained unfazed, leaning casually against the window.

“If the memory loss stems purely from physical trauma or the stress of witnessing the terrorist attack, being removed from that environment can often accelerate recovery. You mentioned experiencing fragments of past memories through dreams or sudden flashes during daily life—that’s likely part of your brain’s natural healing process. Most cases of amnesia resolve as the underlying conflicts are gradually addressed.”

“That’s reassuring, but sometimes the memories that come back feel... unreliable. It’s hard to tell if they’re real or just imagined. And even when they seem genuine, they come in disjointed pieces, like scattered puzzle fragments.”

“That’s understandable. It’s normal to feel unsettled in such situations. When you’re unsure, you can rely on others’ testimonies or tangible evidence to validate your memories. Talking with your caretakers can help, and in turn, they can provide you with objective facts or physical proof to bolster your confidence in those recollections.”

The psychiatrist explained, casting a meaningful look at Olga, Jongwoo, and Zhenya. His optimism hinted that Taekjoo’s recovery was on track. The physical injuries had mostly

healed, and the fact that fragments of memories were resurfacing daily seemed like a promising sign.

However, the psychiatrist warned against blind optimism.

“Of course, in rare cases, patients lose critical memories permanently. For instance, there have been reports of parents forgetting the death of a child, or of amnesia compounded by dissociative disorders.”

“Dissociative disorders?”

“Yes, such as dissociative fugue. Although your case appears different since you’ve regained a sense of self, there are instances where individuals lose their memory and choose not to rediscover their identity. Instead, they live as though they are entirely new people.”

“That sounds like something out of a movie.”

“And yet, it’s real. That’s why it’s become such a common narrative device. Dissociative fugue occurs when someone experiences such a profound emotional shock that they subconsciously ‘escape’ their identity, adopting a new one. This state often leads to significant identity confusion and can impair their ability to function in their profession or daily life.”

Through his glasses, the psychiatrist studied Taekjoo intently, as if probing for signs of such a condition. Taekjoo met his gaze evenly, unbothered. Even when he’d first awakened without a clear sense of identity, his instincts had been sharp. Handling firearms, evading prison guards, and navigating unfamiliar terrain—all had come naturally. Surely, such symptoms didn’t apply to him.

Olga, who had been quietly listening until then, posed a question.

“Are there any medical treatments available?”

“As I mentioned earlier, the most important factor is providing the patient with a supportive environment. Beyond that, we can consider hypnosis or medication. Combining these with long-term psychotherapy can help prevent the onset of PTSD and improve the prognosis. However, since the patient doesn’t reside here, I’d recommend beginning comprehensive treatment back in their home country. It’s likely there will be more witnesses or evidence there to corroborate their memories.”

Hearing this, Olga glanced at Zhenya. She wasn’t entirely sure why, but she felt compelled to gauge his reaction. Perhaps it was because of the argument they had a few days ago when she had mentioned returning to Korea and resuming work at the NIS. Zhenya had opposed it vehemently, and the memory still lingered. Now, he returned her gaze silently, his expression unreadable but laden with thought.

The doctor emphasized the importance of patience in the process of treatment and recovery.

“Ultimately, the person who feels the most confused and frightened right now is the patient. The pressure and anxiety of filling in the blanks in their memory can be overwhelming. It’s possible that, as a form of psychological defense, their mind has constructed barriers to protect them from painful experiences or unresolved conflicts. Overcoming those barriers is essential to begin true healing. However, caregivers should avoid suggesting specific memories or events to the patient. Doing so could unintentionally implant false memories. You must also be careful not to cause undue anxiety for the patient.”

“Understood. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Olga responded earnestly, nodding vigorously. Yoon Jongwoo, on the other hand, hung his head, looking troubled. Perhaps he was reflecting on how he had rushed to recount every detail of recent events at the patient’s request. Now, he seemed worried that cramming in so much information so quickly might have caused more harm than good.

Before Taekjoo could reassure him, Zhenya abruptly crossed the room and left without a word. The suddenness of it left the others exchanging puzzled looks. Even the doctor, who had been observing Zhenya closely, adjusted his glasses and added one final note.

“One more thing. While most patients recover their memories naturally, there are those who never fully reclaim their lost past. They’re unable to overcome the barriers in their minds.”

“Barriers in the mind?”

The doctor elaborated, introducing an entirely unexpected possibility.

“Our bodies have a stronger instinct for self-preservation than we realize. Memories so horrific that they posed a threat to survival in extreme situations might be permanently erased.”

After the doctor left, the group gathered to discuss their next steps. Olga was the first to voice her opinion.

“Why don’t you stay here until your leg heals? There’s no need to rush, especially since your mother isn’t in Korea right now. Jongwoo can arrange for your return through his company, and if that doesn’t work, I’ll help. Jongwoo, you’ve already talked to your company about it, right?”

“Well… I haven’t had the chance yet.” Jongwoo admitted, scratching the back of his head awkwardly.

“You didn’t? It’s not like you’ve been swamped with things to do.”

Jongwoo scratched the back of his head awkwardly. “I’ll do it now,” he muttered, clearly uncomfortable. Olga’s sharp eyes didn’t miss a thing. She suddenly gasped, her eyes wide with realization.

“Wait—did *he* stop you?”

Jongwoo didn’t answer. Instead, he pressed his lips together in silence. Olga jumped to her feet, incredulous.

“Unbelievable! It wasn’t enough for *him* to keep Taekjoo here—he had to keep you here too?”

“No, no, that’s not it. Mr. Yevgeny actually told me to leave a while ago. I chose to stay. Right now, Taekjoo can’t move around on his own, and before you arrived, he didn’t remember Mr. Yevgeny at all. I couldn’t just leave the two of them alone in that situation.”

Listening to him, Taekjoo couldn’t help but wonder about Zhenya’s intentions. If the man’s goal wasn’t to help him recover his memories as quickly and completely as possible, then what was it? Keeping Jongwoo around would have been the practical choice—he could assist with Taekjoo’s care and support the recovery process. So why had Zhenya tried to send him away? What did he plan to do by being alone with Taekjoo?

Was Zhenya afraid that Jongwoo might spill his secrets under the pretext of revisiting the past? He didn’t seem like the type to be so petty.

While trying to decipher Zhenya’s intentions, Taekjoo absentmindedly glanced toward the doorway—and nearly jumped out of his skin. Zhenya was standing there, as if he had materialized out of thin air.

“Ahh!”

“Ahhh! What? What’s wrong, Sunbae?”

Jongwoo screamed in tandem and clung tightly to Taekjoo. Olga, on the other hand, simply stared at her brother with an air of detachment.

There he was again, appearing without a sound. Taekjoo, still shaken, worked to steady his nerves while sneaking a glance at Zhenya’s expression. Had he overheard their conversation? They hadn’t said anything particularly insulting, but guilt still pricked at him, making the atmosphere uncomfortably tense.

Ignoring the others entirely, Zhenya locked eyes with Taekjoo and spoke.

“It’s time for disinfecting.”

“Oh, uh, right. I’m coming.”

Taekjoo stammered, fumbling with his crutches as he tried to stand. Jongwoo and Olga got up as well, only to freeze when Zhenya strode purposefully toward them.

Jongwoo, startled by Zhenya’s bold movements, sank back onto the sofa in a panic. Zhenya paid him no mind and instead swept Taekjoo—crutches and all—into his arms.

“Hey, wait! What are you doing?”

“You’ll take all night.”

“Come on, this place isn’t that big! I can walk on my own!”

“At a snail’s pace, maybe.”

“Just put me down! I’m telling you, I can walk! Listen to me, you lunatic!”

Despite Taekjoo’s protests and the awkward struggle of his limbs, Zhenya didn’t so much as flinch. With an air of calm determination, he carried Taekjoo out of the room. Taekjoo, red in the face and shouting at the top of his lungs, flailed all the way.

“Hey, you jerk! I said I can walk! Why are you so damn stubborn?”

“What? Want me to toss you out the window instead?”

Zhenya scowled, coming to a sudden halt. Taekjoo froze. Right next to them, a wide-open window let in a gust of sea breeze, sending his hair fluttering. Beyond it, the vast, endless ocean awaited. If Zhenya was truly the infamous *Psych*, Taekjoo wouldn’t put it past him to follow through on his threat without a second thought.

The unsettling certainty of that thought drained the fight out of him.

His flailing limbs went still.

“Unbelievable… You’re seriously insane.”

Taekjoo fixed his gaze on the innocent wall instead. Zhenya resumed walking, his pace steady. Somehow, the short distance to the bedroom felt unusually far.

As he was carried like a piece of luggage, Taekjoo sneaked a glance at Zhenya’s face. That blank expression somehow carried an air of stubbornness. *He’d look a lot better if he just smiled once in a while,* Taekjoo thought absentmindedly. His musings were interrupted when their eyes suddenly met. Startled, Taekjoo flinched like a thief caught in the act. Zhenya, who had been silently watching him, averted his gaze. There was something uncharacteristically somber in his expression, something Taekjoo couldn’t look away from.

He only realized they had reached the bedroom when Zhenya set him down gently on the bed. For a fleeting moment, Zhenya’s neck had been close enough for Taekjoo to catch his distinct scent—a blend of sharp, smoky cigar, crisp pine, and damp wood. His heart raced unexpectedly. And when Zhenya stepped back to put some distance between them, Taekjoo felt a strange sense of disappointment.

Zhenya knelt on one knee in front of him, the sunlight pouring in through the window behind him. The rays illuminated his platinum blonde hair, making it seem even more dazzling. His long lashes caught the light, gleaming as if polished. His pale blue eyes looked almost transparent, like aquamarine crystals that would seem real if set into jewelry. *How can*

someone this pretty-looking have so much brute strength? Taekjoo wondered, utterly entranced as he stared at Zhenya's face.

Then, without warning, Zhenya leaned in. Their faces were suddenly so close that Taekjoo could feel the faint warmth of Zhenya's breath.

"What… What are you doing?"

"You seemed like you wanted a closer look. Was I wrong?"

"What kind of nonsense is that? Just get on with the disinfecting."

"Hmm… Alright."

Zhenya sighed as if disappointed, turning to prepare the medical kit. *Did I overreact?* Taekjoo wondered. *What was I even supposed to say? And what was he expecting in the first place?*

The wound on his thigh had healed significantly in just a few days. The bullet hadn't lodged, and the initial emergency treatment had been done well. Taekjoo's natural recovery rate was impressive, too. He had been no stranger to injuries growing up, and he often healed faster than the doctors' projections. Back then, he would sometimes push his luck, relying on his resilience. It wasn't uncommon for him to volunteer for the next operation the moment he was discharged. The headquarters, of course, didn't mind an agent willing to sacrifice his body for the job.

But this—this kind of almost aristocratic recuperation and meticulous care—felt utterly foreign. Zhenya personally inspected Taekjoo's wound every single day. He would carefully remove the bandages, examine the injury, and administer additional treatments as needed. He also kept a close eye on any signs of infection, his hands moving with practiced precision as though he understood Taekjoo's body better than Taekjoo himself. Unable to hold back his curiosity any longer, Taekjoo asked.

"I've been wondering… do you have some kind of medical license or something?"

"Why would I need something like that?"

Zhenya barely lifted his gaze as he replied, his expression making it clear he thought the idea was absurd. Bandaging, disinfecting, administering shots—what kind of license would he need for that? Taekjoo frowned skeptically and started to pull his leg back, only for Zhenya to grip his calf firmly, holding it in place as he continued to disinfect the wound.

"There's nothing to worry about. I'll get rid of it soon."

Zhenya's tone was reassuring, as if to say Taekjoo had been fretting about this all along. But *who* or *what* was he referring to? *It*? Could he mean Olga? If Zhenya thought of her as an intruder, Taekjoo certainly didn't share the sentiment. Her presence had brought him some much-needed relief. Not only did he have another person to talk to, but Olga and Jongwoo's support seemed like it would be crucial in recovering both his health and his memories.

Above all, Olga was a voice of reason—someone who didn't make him constantly second-guess himself or tiptoe around. Without any concrete evidence, he felt that staying with her might help him recover faster, both physically and mentally.

Perhaps Olga could help him recover memories that even Jongwoo hadn't been able to trigger. After all, she seemed to know quite a bit about the connection between him and Zhenya—the very connection that Zhenya stubbornly refused to discuss.

"Do we really have to go that far? She came all this way."

"What? Don't tell me you like that . Or did you suddenly remember something?"

When Taekjoo defended Olga, Zhenya's voice dripped with sarcasm and displeasure. *Why is he so twisted?* Taekjoo sighed softly and tried to reason with him.

"Look, if I'm going to be stuck here until I recover, it's better to have more people around than just the two of us, right?"

"You like having other people around?"

"Of course. It keeps things from getting boring, and talking to them might even help me get my memories back faster."

Taekjoo's words carried no particular weight; they were just an offhand comment. After all, having more people meant more topics to talk about and more things to do—it was a simple matter of practicality.

"You must've been terribly bored, then."

Zhenya's tone suddenly turned icy. His sharp gaze carried a mix of disappointment and resentment. *What now?*

"Of course I've been bored. What do you expect? I've been stuck in bed for days. Why are you suddenly sulking?"

"You really don't know?"

"No, I don't. So how about you spell it out for me?"

"Hah… Look at how you act, Taekjoo. The way you treat me compared to the others—it's night and day. How much longer are you planning to keep me at arm's length? How much longer do I have to put up with it?"

Taekjoo opened his mouth to respond but shut it again just as quickly. Zhenya's complaint sounded almost like a child's pout: *Why do you hang out with everyone else but not me?* And while Taekjoo found it absurd, he couldn't deny the truth of it. He had been far more relaxed around Jongwoo and Olga than he ever was with Zhenya.

But why? Why was it that he could speak so freely with Olga, just as easily as he could with Jongwoo? Was it because their conversations flowed naturally? Because she was a woman?

No, that couldn't be it—he didn't maintain such walls with Matías, either.

The more Taekjoo thought about it, the more he found himself aware of Zhenya in ways that made no sense. Just Zhenya's presence felt vaguely threatening, putting him on edge for no concrete reason. It was as if some primal instinct was warning him to stay alert.

"No matter what the situation, I wouldn't have forgotten. Not even at the very end—I would've remembered you, Taekjoo."

Zhenya's voice was thick with hurt. Before Taekjoo could respond, he stood abruptly and stormed out, the door swinging open so violently it seemed the hinges might snap. A few moments later, Jongwoo poked his head around the corner. Surveying Taekjoo's expression, he quickly stepped inside.

"Are you okay, Sunbae?"

"Yeah."

"Did you and Mr. Yevgeny fight again? It felt like a cold front blew in."

"When isn't that bastard like that?"

With an exasperated sigh, Taekjoo flopped back onto the bed.

"What the hell did I even do to him? Why's he so damn upset?"

No matter how hard he tried, Taekjoo couldn't come up with an answer. The idea of remembering someone, and only that person, even in one's final moments—it seemed impossible. They weren't even blood-related.

Every time he faced Zhenya, it felt like he was grappling with an unsolvable riddle, one with no clear formula or strategy. Zhenya's constant sulking only added to the pressure, leaving Taekjoo desperate to find some kind of solution. But where to even begin? The frustration built day by day, and all he could do was helplessly ruffle his hair in irritation.

Olga stood outside Taekjoo's room, waiting for Zhenya. When her brother tried to walk past her without a glance, she stopped him.

"We need to talk."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"I have something to say, so listen."

Her tone left no room for argument. Zhenya whirled around, his eyes blazing and his jaw tense.

"Why do you keep pushing your luck? Do you have a death wish?"

“I’m not afraid of dying. What’s the point of living when it won’t be for much longer anyway? But let me ask you—if you hurt me, do you think Taekjoo will still care for you like he used to?”

Zhenya’s brow furrowed as if she’d just said something absurd. Olga and Taekjoo were nothing to each other. The idea that harming Olga would make Taekjoo hate him seemed nonsensical.

But Olga, confident in her logic, continued.

“I’ve already spent time with Taekjoo. I’ve met his mother multiple times, and I’m your family. If you lay a hand on me, Taekjoo will never forgive you. He’ll pull even further away and fear you more than he already does.”

A short, dry laugh escaped Zhenya. He looked at her, incredulous, as if questioning the source of her conviction. Sure, Taekjoo didn’t want Zhenya cutting ties with his family. If Zhenya went so far as to kill one of them, it wouldn’t sit well. But for that alone, would Taekjoo sever ties with him forever? Hardly. Taekjoo already knew what kind of man Zhenya was.

Olga seemed to read his thoughts, relentlessly pressing forward.

“Are you sure about that? That Taekjoo would still embrace you like before, even knowing you’re a killer who’s willing to murder his own blood? He doesn’t remember who you are or what you meant to him. Do you really think it’ll be easy for him to accept?”

“You don’t know anything.”

Zhenya growled, grinding his teeth. Olga’s habit of underestimating him and lecturing grated on his nerves. Worse, he couldn’t deny her words. Her reasoning chained him like invisible shackles, filling him with frustration.

Watching her brother’s growing agitation, Olga sighed. Her next words carried a softer tone.

“Face reality, Zhenya. Right now, you’re practically a stranger to Taekjoo. His memories of you are gone. So what’s your plan? Keep demanding that he remember you, no matter how he feels? If you really want to call yourself his lover, you should focus on helping him recover those memories, not dragging him into your storm.”

“Yes, a lover. So even if he lost all his memories, I should have been the one he couldn’t forget.”

Zhenya couldn’t accept how easily he’d been erased from Taekjoo’s mind. He had worked so hard to leave his mark on him, only for all of it to feel meaningless now.

“Stop being unreasonable. He didn’t forget because he wanted to. Can’t you see how hard this is on him already? Why are you making it worse?”

“If you try hard enough not to forget, you won’t. It carves itself into your soul, etches itself into your bones.”

Olga ran a hand over her face. Talking to him was like hitting a wall—always had been. Zhenya's hostility toward others, his distrust of everyone but himself, and his self-centered way of thinking made it impossible for him to truly understand or empathize with anyone else. His stubbornness only reinforced her belief that he was nothing more than an overgrown child.

Olga scoffed.

"How profound was your so-called relationship, really?"

As expected, his piercing gaze shot daggers at her, but she didn't flinch.

"Let's not sugarcoat it. You dragged him to your private little hellhole, bullied him into submission, and forced him to call it love. Isn't that about right?"

"No matter how you belittle it, Taekjoo is still my lover."

"He's forgotten all of that."

Olga countered, redirecting the conversation before it veered off track. She wasn't just trying to criticize him; she wanted to make him understand. Seeing his puzzled expression, she sighed and softened her tone, breaking it down further.

"The doctors said he'll probably recover most of his memories, but not all of them. Think about it—would it really be a good thing for him to remember everything about his time with you? I don't think so. Before he accepted you, his life must have been filled with pain and suffering because of you. Forgetting your bad history isn't just a blessing—it's an opportunity. This time, you can rebuild your relationship properly. You can treat him with care, the way normal couples do."

"Rebuild the relationship?"

"Yes. Instead of demanding that he remember you, make him fall for you again. For real, this time. Approach him slowly and gently. If you don't overwhelm him, he won't feel scared or wary. And when the time comes for him to learn that you were his lover, it'll be easier for him to accept."

Zhenya didn't understand easily. Someone who barely grasped common emotions couldn't possibly comprehend the nuances of romantic feelings. At best, he'd act on whatever drew him in, pushing his partner relentlessly to the point of overwhelming them.

The doctor had warned against triggering specific memories or contaminating them. But what if those memories were so painful that it wouldn't matter if they were erased? If something was purely a source of torment, perhaps letting it fade entirely was for the best. There was no need to carry such burdensome memories through life.

"If the memories aren't particularly precious or beautiful, wouldn't it be better to cut out the painful ones if you can? For both you and Taekjoo."

Was it a tempting offer? Zhenya didn't respond immediately, narrowing his eyes suspiciously at Olga.

"What's your intention?"

"Intention? What do you mean?"

"Why are you pretending to help me?"

"I'm not helping you; I'm helping Taekjoo. I owe him a lot. If you two were to break apart, I'd lose three friends at once. That would be too much of a loss for me. If that's the price of having an idiotic brother, I might as well settle things now."

Olga added a string of cryptic remarks.

"Besides, I liked how Taekjoo ended that Koschei story he told. This time, I thought I might try playing the clever heroine myself."

"Heroine?"

Zhenya furrowed his brows as though he'd just heard something absurd. Olga didn't seem to mind and smiled meaningfully.

"Or perhaps I'll play Baba Yaga disguised as a heroine."

She was personally curious. Even without being trapped in a dire situation, would the brave knight still fall in love with the monster?

"So you're telling me I said I'd quit the NIS as soon as this Iran mission was over?"

Kwon Taekjoo asked again, his face betraying utter disbelief. This marked the third time he'd posed the same question. Yoon Jongwoo nodded wearily, his expression one of exasperation.

"Yes, that's exactly what you said."

"Why?"

"Why? How would I know? You were so abrupt about it."

"Don't tell me…"

"Don't tell you what?"

"Did I… maybe have a kid somewhere?"

"What? Are you serious, Sunbae?"

Jongwoo nearly jumped out of his chair, his reaction a mix of shock and mild panic. He didn't even question why the conversation had taken such a wild turn. Instead, he seemed

ready to believe it might actually make sense for Kwon Taekjoo to have done something that reckless.

“No, that can’t be it… Otherwise, it wouldn’t make any sense for me to have someone in my life more important than work. I mean, I took this job even after my mother tried to stop me, and I went so far as to lie to her about it.”

“Well, that’s true… but if it’s something that big, why wouldn’t I know about it?”

“Because if I told you, you’d go running to my mom, and then she’d start grilling me about what kind of woman she is, right?”

“Ah, now that you mention it… You *have* been softer than usual lately, Sunbae.”

Yoon Jongwoo quickly nodded in agreement, rubbing his chin as he reflected on how much Kwon Taekjoo had changed recently.

“But why would you suddenly guess that you might have a kid? Did something else come to mind?”

“No, it’s just… I keep having strange dreams.”

“Strange dreams?”

“Well, they might actually be memories. There’s this really pretty little kid who keeps showing up. Every time they see me, they start crying, but if I hold them and pat their back, they calm down. They cling to me like they don’t want to let go, so I started wondering if they’re someone I know. And when I thought about some of my earlier dreams, it felt like maybe I had a girlfriend too.”

“What?! So somewhere out there, my niece or nephew is already born? Was it a boy? Or a girl? Did they look like you?”

“Why the ‘did they look like you’ part?”

“Well, you know… babies are cuter when they’re soft and gentle-looking.”

“They didn’t look anything like me. I couldn’t even tell if it was a boy or a girl. The kid had this light blonde hair.”

“Blonde? So they’re mixed-race? Does that mean my sister-in-law is a foreigner?”

“Mixed-race… maybe. There wasn’t a hint of anything Asian about them.”

As Yoon Jongwoo was busy imagining his yet-to-exist niece or nephew, there was a knock at the door. It felt more like a formality, though, as the door burst open before anyone could respond.

“What are you two doing holed up in here? Don’t you feel cooped up?”

Olga called out, gesturing for them to follow her outside. She was wearing a thin beach dress over her swimsuit, clearly ready for some fun in the water. Jongwoo shot Taekjoo a pleading look, his eyes practically sparkling with hope. After all, resting indoors was only fun for so long. Having barely stepped outside the villa since they arrived, it seemed like the perfect chance to get some fresh air.

“Alright. Let’s go.”

“Yes! Time to hit the water!”

Yoon Jongwoo hopped around gleefully. Since when did this guy, practically a landlubber, start loving the water so much? Shaking his head, Kwon Taekjoo followed him outside, noticing that the glass doors leading to the backyard were wide open. Despite having spent a week at the villa, he hadn’t even realized there was a pool. As soon as he stepped out into the backyard, the distinct scent of chlorine hit his nose. The outdoor pool came into view, and it was surprisingly large. It had around ten sunbeds, parasols, and even a poolside bar, resembling something straight out of a resort brochure.

Beyond the pool, the endless blue expanse of the Mediterranean stretched out before them. The warm sunlight poured down unobstructed, and a gentle breeze cooled their skin. The sky above was cloudless and vivid, its azure reflection mirrored perfectly in the still surface of the pool. Occasionally, the sound of faint ripples lapping against the edges of the water broke the tranquil silence.

“Come over here and lie down! The sun’s perfect today.”

Olga called, snapping them out of their daze. She was already lounging on a sunbed in her swimsuit. Jongwoo, who had been busy admiring the pool’s luxurious setup, quickly averted his gaze to the sky as if it were the most fascinating thing in the world. His face turned crimson, the flush creeping all the way to his ears. Taekjoo tapped Jongwoo’s backside with his crutch and claimed the spot next to Olga. Under the shade of a gently swaying parasol, the cool breeze washing over him, he felt the tension in his chest dissipate. It was oddly refreshing. He found himself wondering how he, a public servant, had ended up in such an opulent setting, mingling in what felt like aristocratic leisure. Had he been this far removed from the concept of modesty in his past self?

Lost in thought, he was suddenly interrupted when Olga thrust a bottle of tanning lotion toward him.

“Can you put this on for me?”

She made the request as if it were the most natural thing in the world, not even bothering to gauge his willingness. It was clear she was adept at getting people to do her bidding.

“Why are you asking a patient to do that? Make him do it.”

Taekjoo tossed the lotion to Jongwoo without hesitation. Jongwoo caught it with all the grace of someone handed a scalding hot rock.

“Huh? M-me? I’ve never done something like this before…!”

“Hurry up! I need it spread evenly.”

Olga said, bouncing her legs impatiently. She didn’t seem to care in the slightest whether it was Taekjoo or Jongwoo who helped her. Swallowing nervously, Jongwoo crouched awkwardly beside her. From his pocket, he pulled out the silicone gloves he usually used when applying Taekjoo’s ointments, slipped them on, and began cautiously spreading the lotion over Olga’s skin. His gaze remained firmly fixed somewhere far off in the distance, as if avoiding eye contact would somehow make the situation less mortifying. No wonder the guy had never been in a relationship, Taekjoo thought, clicking his tongue. Letting out a sigh, he turned his attention to the poolside bar. Maybe they had something cold to drink.

Should he head to the kitchen? Kwon Taekjoo was still mulling it over when a group of house staff emerged from the building, carrying trays laden with finger foods, drinks, and cocktails. Some even floated colorful snacks and beverages on flat, wide baskets in the pool—a scene straight out of a honeymoon resort brochure.

“Who are *they*?”

“They’re the staff that guy sent away. I called them back. We’re not staying here for just a day or two. How could we manage without help?”

The “we” she referred to most likely didn’t include him, the actual patient. It was clear Olga had little patience for inconvenience herself. If anything, she had no intention of doing any work on her own. These aristocratic types were all the same.

Taekjoo scanned the area, eyes darting around as if searching for another member of this so-called aristocracy. Specifically, he was looking for Zhenya, who had been conspicuously absent all morning. Was he sleeping in? Or perhaps swimming wasn’t his thing?

“Looking for someone?”

Olga’s sudden question broke his focus, her tone sharp as if she’d read his mind. Taekjoo feigned indifference, maintaining a calm demeanor.

“Looking? For what?”

“Seems like you’re missing someone.”

“Missing? More like uneasy.”

Rolling his eyes, he reached for a beer bottle with a wedge of lemon perched on the rim. But before he could grab it, Olga snatched it away effortlessly.

“Where do you think you’re going with that? You’re a patient. You’ll get an infection.”

“From what? A little scratch like this? What am I supposed to do, just sit here and watch *you* eat and drink?”

“There’s always this.”

Olga said, handing him a lemon-flavored soda. Taekjoo grimaced but begrudgingly took a sip. Better than nothing, he supposed. Meanwhile, Olga and Jongwoo were already clinking their beer bottles together with a cheerful “Cheers!” They drank with such enthusiasm, they might as well have been celebrating some kind of dubious victory. Watching them, Taekjoo muttered under his breath, “What a pair of cockroaches.”

“Aren’t you curious?”

As Kwon Taekjoo took another gulp of his drink, Olga abruptly spoke, catching him off guard. He stopped mid-sip and glanced at her.

“About what?”

“What kind of relationship you had with that guy.”

Olga’s eyes narrowed slightly as she smiled, her expression teasing, as if she were dangling a secret in front of him. Taekjoo turned his head to face forward, shrugging indifferently.

“Well, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious. I still don’t remember a thing about him. All he does is throw me these expectant looks, like I should hurry up and recall something. From what little I’ve pieced together or heard from others, we must’ve been close. But honestly, he’s not the kind of guy I’d normally keep around. Unless I completely lost my morals in those two or three years I can’t remember.”

Olga listened quietly, her lips curving into a sly smile. To Jongwoo, she appeared as radiant as butter melting on a hot pan, but to Taekjoo, her smile seemed faintly unsettling.

“Want me to tell you? About what kind of relationship you two had?”

“Why do you and that guy keep skirting around the truth? If you’re going to say something, just spit it out. If not, drop it.”

“Hmm… I’m happy to tell you anytime you’re ready.”

“I’m ready now.”

“But are you sure you’re ready to hear it just like that?”

Olga feigned concern, her tone dripping with insincerity. She cast a brief glance at Jongwoo, as if silently asking if it was appropriate to reveal such things in front of a third party. Taekjoo snorted, utterly unimpressed.

“That idiot already knows everything. There’s nothing left to hide between us.”

Taking his words as permission, Olga gave a slight nod and, without much hesitation, dropped the bombshell.

“You two were lovers.”

“What? Who?”

“You and that guy. You were in love.”

The follow-up explanation hit like a bombshell, leaving both Kwon Taekjoo and Yoon Jongwoo coughing violently. Their fits of choking were so intense that Olga flinched back, openly expressing her annoyance at the spectacle.

When the two finally managed to catch their breath, they stared at each other in stunned silence. Both had beer and soda dripping off their chins, looking utterly disheveled. Jongwoo, still dazed, slowly closed his knees together and awkwardly placed his hands over his lap.

“Sunbae! I had no idea you were like that!”

“I didn’t know either, you idiot!”

The two shouted over Olga, who simply furrowed her brows in irritation before standing up. Without so much as a backward glance, she sauntered into the pool, leaving the two men to deal with her verbal grenade. She floated idly on the water, completely unbothered by the chaos she had just unleashed.

Taekjoo was left reeling. He and Zhenya? Lovers? How? When? Why? He could barely fathom the possibility, much less accept it. The notion of being in love with someone he considered no less than a mortal enemy seemed absurd.

Questions flooded his mind, each more unanswerable than the last. Was Olga joking? Could she really be so cruel? It felt utterly surreal, more implausible than anything else he’d learned about his forgotten past.

He tried to retrace his memories. His first love had been unremarkably normal, just like everyone else’s. All his romantic relationships had been with women, without exception. Even during his years in all-male environments—middle school, high school, engineering college, and military service—he’d never once had any kind of connection with another man. Even his fleeting encounters during undercover missions, with seduction as part of the job, had always been with women.

So how on earth could it have been Zhenya? The pieces of his fragmented past that Jongwoo had shared with him had always felt strangely plausible. But this? This was beyond imagination. To think that the only missing piece of the puzzle was something so… *this*.

“There’s no way. Absolutely not.”

Taekjoo muttered, his voice tinged with disbelief. He stared at Olga with empty eyes, as if she had just told him the sky was green. He shook his head vehemently, denying the possibility with every fiber of his being. Olga, meanwhile, remained completely unfazed. She plucked a shrimp from a floating basket in the pool and popped it into her mouth, responding nonchalantly.

“Isn’t love exactly what makes the impossible… possible?”

His chest felt heavy, his stomach churned with a queasiness that made him want to keel over. It was as though the air in his lungs had thickened, making every breath a struggle. His head was blank, incapable of coherent thought, and his pulse was racing uncontrollably.

"I... I need to rest."

Taekjoo muttered, pushing himself to his feet unsteadily. Jongwoo half-rose from his seat, concern evident on his face. "Should I help you?" Taekjoo waved him off. He limped away, leaning heavily on his crutches, and made his way into the villa. His mind was in turmoil, overwhelmed by the bombshell Olga had just dropped. He needed to think. Alone. Was what Olga said true? Could she have been mistaken? He needed to verify this. Surely, there had to be some misunderstanding, some missing piece of information.

Lost in these thoughts, Taekjoo turned into a corridor—and froze. A group of house staff was clustered near the front entrance. Just then, Zhenya stepped through the door. The sight was so sudden that Taekjoo let out a yelp.

"Ah!"

"...What's with the overreaction?"

Zhenya frowned, his sharp gaze raking over Taekjoo from head to toe. Taekjoo cleared his throat awkwardly, trying to regain composure.

"Where've you been?"

"Out."

Zhenya replied vaguely, as always. That infuriatingly ambiguous tone grated on Taekjoo's nerves. He glared at Zhenya, his annoyance plain on his face. But his eyes soon drifted to the paper bag Zhenya was carrying. The neck of a bottle peeked out from its top—he must've gone out for alcohol.

"Why? Want a drink?"

Zhenya asked, his voice laced with dry amusement. Taekjoo scoffed.

"No."

Zhenya's expression barely changed, but there was a flicker of disappointment in his eyes—or at least it seemed that way. Maybe Taekjoo was imagining it. After all, wasn't it ridiculous to even entertain the idea that Zhenya had once been his lover? And yet, the idea gnawed at the edges of his thoughts.

As much as he tried to shake it off, he found himself glancing at Zhenya, unable to look away. The sunlight filtering through the windows highlighted Zhenya's pale, smooth skin, giving it an almost luminescent quality. His long lashes cast delicate shadows on his cheeks, swaying slightly with the faint breeze. Then there were his eyes—those piercing aquamarine irises, so clear they reflected Taekjoo's image like a polished gem. Taekjoo's gaze lingered on

the elegant slope of Zhenya's nose and the soft curve of his lips. The longer their eyes met, the deeper Zhenya's gaze seemed to grow, like an ocean pulling him in.

In truth, Zhenya's delicate face hadn't changed—it was as infuriatingly flawless as ever. Yet somehow, it felt different. Was it the clothes? The flowy shirt made his once-imposing frame seem far less threatening, almost approachable.

So... he had been in a relationship with this guy? And not just a fleeting, impulsive fling, but a proper relationship, serious enough for even Zhenya's family to acknowledge? Serious enough that he'd introduced Zhenya to his own mother? Was this some star-crossed lovers' trope straight out of a movie—falling in love with an enemy? And with a man, no less?

It was hard to accept. Impossible, really. And yet, it explained everything. Why Zhenya had spared Taekjoo's life despite him being a spy from a rival nation. Why Zhenya had followed him all the way to Korea, cleared his name, and even helped deceive his own mother. Why he had gone to such lengths to find Taekjoo after he disappeared.

Even Zhenya's frustrations over Taekjoo's memory loss made sense now. The desperate hugs, the attempts to kiss him—all of it fell into place. Lovers. Because they were lovers. Enemies-turned-lovers wasn't exactly a groundbreaking story. If anything, it was so overdone that it bordered on cliché. But *him?* Taekjoo?

No matter how much he tried to rationalize it, the doubts kept circling back.

"Do you want a drink or not?"

Zhenya's voice cut through his spiral of thoughts. He held up the bottle he'd brought, his pale, elegant hand effortlessly gripping the large bottle and giving it a gentle shake. Unbidden, Taekjoo swallowed hard.

"Well, Taekjoo?"

The way Zhenya spoke his name was maddeningly sweet, almost coaxing, as if they were simply two people about to share a drink, nothing more. Taekjoo shook his head vigorously.

"N-No! I, uh, I left something in my room!"

Without waiting for a response, he turned and hobbled away on his crutches, his movements jerky and disjointed like a malfunctioning robot. If not for the crutches, he might have tripped and fallen flat on his face.

Zhenya tilted his head slightly as he watched Taekjoo's awkward retreat. It was strange—he'd never seen Taekjoo so flustered. Even when he had rejected Zhenya outright, even when he had eventually allowed their relationship to happen, he had never looked this rattled.

And yet... Zhenya's sharp eyes didn't miss the faint flush spreading across the curve of Taekjoo's ear. Nor did he overlook the way his Adam's apple bobbed nervously, or how his usually clear gaze was suddenly unfocused and hazy. Those were all familiar signs. They were the same reactions Taekjoo had whenever he... found Zhenya attractive.

“Make him fall for you again. For real, this time. Approach him slowly and gently. If you don’t overwhelm him, he won’t feel scared or wary. And when the time comes for him to learn that you were his lover, it’ll be easier for him to accept.”

At the time, Zhenya had dismissed the suggestion outright. It seemed ridiculous, like something out of a bad romance novel. Could such a thing even work? But now, watching Taekjoo’s flustered retreat—his reddened ears, the way he avoided Zhenya’s gaze, the nervous gulp in his throat—he found himself reconsidering.

Maybe Olga’s idea wasn’t so outlandish after all. Maybe, just maybe, there was something to it.

He ran and ran through an endless white expanse of snow. It was unclear whether he was chasing something or being chased. His breath, labored and visible in the cold, escaped in rapid bursts, the air around him dark and boundless. The peaks of distant mountains and slender birch trees seemed to loom closer for a fleeting moment, only to stretch away into infinity. It was a perfect void of black and white.

By the time his lungs ached and burned, something struck him from behind, enveloping him entirely. It was darkness—an amorphous shadow that clung to him with a sticky persistence. He thrashed, trying to break free, but his limbs were completely entangled. His arms and legs felt bound, and a crushing weight bore down on his back and the back of his head, as though a heavy boulder had been placed there.

“Damn it!”

He struggled desperately to escape. The harder he fought, the tighter the shadow constricted him, the more relentless its grip became. The pressure on his body intensified, crushing his insides until it felt as though his organs were being flattened. Breathing was impossible.

And yet, the sensation of the thing against his skin was disarmingly soft. It felt like animal fur, silky and warm, yet also reminiscent of smooth, bare flesh. It weighed down on him heavily, almost suffocating, but its voice—low and sweet—whispered in his ear.

“Taekjoo.”

Goosebumps spread across his cheeks, and every fine hair on his body stood on end. He recognized that voice, the bittersweet tone laced with longing.

Who was it? Who could it be?

“Are you just going to leave like this?”

The shadow tightened its grip, its weight pressing more heavily against him. Taekjoo’s breath hitched painfully as he gasped for air, thrashing his limbs in vain but nothing changed.

“You can’t just leave again, Taekjoo.”

A voice, laced with resentment, burrowed into his ears, reverberating in his head like a sharp hum. While he hesitated, caught off guard, his own voice suddenly rang out, slicing through the emptiness like a blade.

"Stop showing up. You're so damn annoying!"

It wasn't something he had consciously spoken. He couldn't control it, yet there was no denying it was his voice.

At that irritable outburst, the suffocating grip on his body dissolved instantly. The oppressive weight on his back vanished just as suddenly. Dazed, he turned his head, and there he saw a child, their blue eyes brimming with tears. The child's exact features were blurry and indistinct, but he could make out the small, trembling shoulders.

The child, who had been sniffling quietly, broke into a heart-wrenching sob before disappearing into the darkness. There was no time to stop it, no chance to reach out.

"...!"

He opened his eyes, greeted by the now-familiar sight of the ceiling above him. Another dream. But this one was hazier, more abstract than before. Everything about it—the events, the people, their meanings—was indistinct, leaving only an unsettling vagueness in its wake.

Feeling uneasy, he grabbed a bottle of water and drank deeply. Yet the pounding in his chest refused to calm. It wasn't just a quickened heartbeat. Each thud felt like his heart was dropping, leaving him with a persistent sense of dread, like he'd forgotten something critically important.

Scratching the back of his head in frustration, he climbed out of bed. Maybe a shower would help wash away the unease. By now, he could manage a hobbling walk to the bathroom without the crutch. A doctor would have been horrified to see him pushing his recovery like this, but convenience outweighed caution in Taekjoo's mind. Relying on others had always made him itch with discomfort.

He covered the wound on his thigh with a waterproof patch and stepped into the shower. Cool water cascaded over him, drumming against his head and body. Slowly, he ran a hand down his face, the sensation clearing some of the fog from his mind. Slapping his cheeks lightly, he tried to shake off the lingering haze.

As he finished his shower and turned to leave, something in the corner of his vision caught his attention—a silhouette, unfamiliar and intrusive. He froze, his body tensing instinctively. When he finally focused on the doorway, there stood Zhenya, as always, silent and unreadable. How long had he been there? And why was he so infuriatingly good at sneaking up on people without a sound? Frustration bubbled up in Taekjoo, and he barked at him, his voice sharp with irritation.

"Oh, for crying out loud! You're not a ghost—could you at least make some noise when you move around?"

“Lost your memory and your nerve, huh?”

Zhenya’s tone was sharp, laced with mockery rather than any trace of apology or embarrassment. Whether he intended it or not, everything he said sounded like a taunt. His way of speaking was inherently insufferable.

Taekjoo clicked his tongue in irritation, only to suddenly realize—he was stark naked. The realization hit him hard, made worse by Zhenya’s brazen stare, unapologetically fixed on his body. Flustered, Taekjoo scrambled to change the subject, grabbing the towel draped around his neck to awkwardly shield his lower half.

“So, uh, did you sleep well?”

“Well enough. Not a bad night.”

Zhenya’s answer was nonchalant, accompanied by a light nod. Taekjoo desperately wanted to steer the conversation elsewhere, but nothing came to mind. If he didn’t know that Zhenya had been his supposed *boyfriend*, he’d have just told him to get lost. Instead, he found himself unable to deal with him so bluntly. Water dripped steadily from his hair, and when he tried to dry it, he realized the movement would expose too much. It was a lose-lose situation, leaving him paralyzed in an awkward standstill.

As he hesitated, Zhenya took a step forward, closing the gap between them with swift, purposeful strides.

“Give it here.”

“I can handle it. It’s just—”

Taekjoo started, pulling away defensively. But his fumbling attempts to resist only made him lose his grip on the towel, undoing all his efforts to cover himself. He was now fully exposed, much to his horror.

“Need help drying off down there, too?”

Zhenya teased, a smirk playing on his lips and mischief dancing in his eyes. Taekjoo shook his head furiously but said nothing, standing frozen. Without a word, Zhenya bent down, picked up the fallen towel, and draped it over Taekjoo’s wet hair. His hands, surprisingly large, gently began to rub the towel over his hair, absorbing the moisture. Perhaps it made sense—he was tall, after all—but the touch felt oddly familiar. Even the small gesture of carefully wrapping the towel ends around Taekjoo’s ears carried an inexplicable intimacy.

Their eyes met unexpectedly. Zhenya’s gaze, uncharacteristically calm and steady, seemed to anchor the moment in place. Time felt as though it had stopped, caught in the space between them. And in that moment, a single thought crystallized in Taekjoo’s mind: *So I really... was with this guy...?*

“Sunbae! Where are you?”

Yoon Jongwoo's loud, energetic voice echoed from outside, snapping Taekjoo out of his daze. Startled, he blinked, the vivid fantasy dissolving in an instant. Zhenya's brows furrowed slightly, a faint wrinkle forming between them.

"Are you... in the bathroom? Need help?"

Jongwoo's voice was even closer now, practically at the bathroom door. His booming tone carried effortlessly through the walls. Letting Jongwoo see him like this was not an option.

"I'm starving. Let's go."

Taekjoo muttered, giving Zhenya's shoulder a quick tap before stepping out of the bathroom. Jongwoo's eyes widened like saucers as he caught sight of Taekjoo stepping out, still towel-drying his damp hair.

"You were showering alone? Why didn't you call me? That must've been uncomfortable for you..."

Jongwoo's words trailed off as his gaze slowly shifted past Taekjoo's shoulder. His complexion drained of color in an instant, his face paling visibly.

When Taekjoo glanced back, Zhenya's expression remained blank, devoid of any discernible emotion. Calm and composed, Zhenya approached Taekjoo and draped a robe over his shoulders. Without a word, he slid an arm around Taekjoo's side and deftly tied the robe's belt in place.

"Breakfast is ready. I made something you'll like."

Zhenya murmured with a subtle smile, his eyes crinkling slightly.

He turned and left the room, his movements smooth and unhurried. Taekjoo watched him leave, then turned his attention to Jongwoo, who was sweating profusely, his eyes darting everywhere but at Taekjoo.

"What's your problem? Why are you freaking out? That guy, he seems... decent enough, don't you think?"

"Decent? Sunbae, you're clearly not in your right mind if that's what you think."

"What are you talking about? I mean, he's not as bad as you made him out to be. Sure, he's intense, but he's not that violent, and he can actually be pretty cooperative sometimes."

"Oh, I see. You're in love with him. That explains the rose-colored glasses."

"What the—"

Taekjoo snapped, lunging to grab Jongwoo by the collar. In his haste, his robe came loose, leaving him feeling exposed. Jongwoo, unbothered, glanced downward and, in the most nonchalant tone imaginable, directed a polite greeting toward Taekjoo's lower half.

“Yes, hello to you too. Did you sleep well? So full of energy this morning.”

Jongwoo adjusted the lapels of Taekjoo’s robe for him, then fetched a pair of boxers, placing them neatly on the bed. “Here, put these on,” he said, spinning around in a show of exaggerated modesty. The whole act felt painfully contrived. Ever since Jongwoo learned that Taekjoo and Zhenya were, as he put it, “involved,” he’d been acting this way—awkward, overly formal, and clearly trying too hard not to show it. Even Taekjoo found it hard to look at Zhenya without a thousand conflicting thoughts swirling in his head. How could Jongwoo possibly stay unaffected?

Slipping into the boxers and securing his robe, Taekjoo left the room. Outside, a handful of house staff, presumably summoned by Olga, loitered nervously near the dining area. It was obvious they had been dismissed by Zhenya. Taekjoo dismissed them further with a glance before stepping inside. Olga was nowhere to be seen—likely still asleep. In the kitchen, Zhenya stood at the counter, busy preparing something.

The sunlight streaming through the window highlighted Zhenya’s broad back, tracing his muscular contours with sharp contrasts of light and shadow. Taekjoo’s eyes lingered involuntarily on the movement of his shoulder blades, the taut lines of his back, and the loose black apron tied casually around his waist.

“Sunbae?”

Jongwoo’s voice jolted him back to reality, accompanied by a wave of fingers snapping in front of his face.

“Oh, uh... yeah, let’s sit. Come on, sit.”

Taekjoo stammered, clearing his throat as he took a seat at the table. Zhenya turned to glance at him just then, his gaze lingering in that unsettlingly quiet way of his. Was staring people down a habit of his?

Taekjoo tilted his head in silent question, and Zhenya responded by placing a cup of coffee in front of him. Without thinking, Taekjoo took a sip, only to raise his eyebrows in surprise. The taste was flawless, perfectly aligned with his preferences. Taekjoo shot Zhenya an incredulous look, to which Zhenya merely tilted his chin slightly—half a smirk, half a snort, a gesture that somehow managed to scream *self-satisfaction*.

“What’s that smell?”

“Dare I hope... Is that yukgaejang? Or maybe beef soup?”

Jongwoo whispered excitedly, leaning in. As their anticipation grew, Zhenya approached with a bowl and placed it in front of Taekjoo. It was unmistakably *yukgaejang*. Taekjoo stared at the dish in awe. *Where on earth did he find this?* Looking up, he met Zhenya’s gaze with undisguised wonder. And of course, Zhenya responded with another smirk, a quiet, smug amusement emanating from every fiber of his being. *This guy’s ego knows no bounds,* Taekjoo thought, suppressing an exasperated sigh.

A quick glance at the counter revealed the packaging of an instant *yukgaejang* soup. Taekjoo suddenly remembered Zhenya's solo outing a few days prior, where he'd returned with bags full of groceries. Had he gone all the way to a Korean store to pick up these items? The thought that Zhenya not only remembered his preferences but went out of his way to prepare something special warmed him more than he cared to admit.

Taekjoo chuckled and offered his thanks.

"Thanks. This looks great."

He was about to take a generous spoonful when he felt an intense gaze burning into him. Turning his head, he caught Jongwoo staring fixedly at the bowl, unable to hide his longing. Clicking his tongue, Taekjoo decided to intervene.

"Hey, can't you spare him some too?"

"Why should I?"

"He's clearly dying to try it,"

"That's not my concern."

"Come on, don't be stingy. There's plenty left in the pot, isn't there? It's not like you or your sister are going to eat it. You're not seriously going to be petty over food, are you?"

Zhenya shot Jongwoo a disdainful look, which made the younger man shrink slightly. Still, Jongwoo managed to stammer.

"No, it's fine, really. I'm good with this."

Jongwoo replied as he tore into a plate of *blini* that the house staff had prepared. The expression on his face as he chewed suggested even hay might have tasted better.

Taekjoo tilted his head toward Jongwoo, silently urging Zhenya. With a loud sigh, Zhenya relented, roughly ladling some soup from the pot into a bowl and shoving it toward Jongwoo. The difference was stark. While Taekjoo's bowl was brimming with meat, taro stems, and other hearty ingredients, Jongwoo's portion was practically barren, containing little more than a few fern stalks floating in the broth. Yet, Jongwoo slurped it down with unrestrained delight, as if it were the nectar of the gods.

Watching his junior endure such treatment just to share a meal left Taekjoo feeling guilty. He scooped a generous amount of the hearty stew from his own bowl and placed it into Jongwoo's.

"Here, you little *bastard*[1]. Eat up."

"Ah, really, I'm fine—"

Jongwoo started, only to be cut off by the warmth of Taekjoo's gesture. The rare moment of camaraderie didn't last long. A sharp, icy stare pierced through the room. As expected,

Zhenya was standing there, arms crossed, glaring at the two of them with an expression that could freeze flames. *What's his problem now?* Taekjoo thought, exasperated. Was he upset about Jongwoo eating some of the food he'd prepared? That had to be it. But really? Was Zhenya so petty? Taekjoo couldn't help but wonder how he had ever gotten involved with someone so absurdly possessive.

Jongwoo hesitated for a moment, then leaned closer to Taekjoo, his voice barely audible, like rapid-fire whispers meant only for him.

"Sunbae, please don't call me *bastard* in front of Mr. Yevgeny."

"What? Why not?"

"It's just… a thing, okay?"

"What are you two whispering about now?"

Zhenya's sharp voice cut through the conversation. The displeasure on his face was blatant, his piercing gaze fixed on Jongwoo with unsettling intensity. Trying to defuse the situation, Jongwoo laughed nervously.

"I was just saying how amazing the *yukgaejang* is! Really, it's fantastic!"

He even gave a thumbs-up for good measure.

Despite Jongwoo's exaggerated enthusiasm, Zhenya's bristling demeanor didn't waver. His eyes remained cold, scanning Jongwoo as though dissecting his every move.

"Did everyone sleep well?"

Olga's voice interrupted the tension, pulling the trio's attention toward her. She appeared fully dressed, clearly ready to head out. The immaculate polish of her look suggested she was planning a day of sightseeing or errands.

"Good morning, Miss Olga. Did you sleep well?"

"I did, thank you. But… what is that smell?"

She scrunched her nose and leaned toward Taekjoo's bowl of *yukgaejang*, only to recoil immediately. Gagging slightly, she clutched her nose and coughed as if the aroma had personally offended her. Taekjoo didn't miss a beat, reprimanding her as he usually did.

"What kind of manners are those? You don't just wrinkle your nose at someone else's food like that."

"You make a face every time you see Russian food, don't you?"

"Well, honestly, if I had to eat that for the rest of my life, I'd seriously consider checking out early."

Taekjoo's blunt response was accompanied by an exaggerated spoonful of *yukgaejang*, which he shoveled into his mouth with deliberate enthusiasm. His cheeks puffed out comically as he worked through the large bite, clearly making a show of it. He didn't stop until he had polished off every last drop of broth, leaving the bowl spotless. Then, with theatrical flair, he finished with a sip of strong coffee. Zhenya, who had been quietly watching him the entire time, suddenly softened. A faint smile tugged at his lips, though the reason for his amusement remained elusive. What, exactly, was so satisfying about all this? Taekjoo couldn't figure it out.

"If you're done eating, clear the table already. I can't stand this smell."

Olga said, waving at the staff to come over. Responding quickly to her impatience, the servants cleared the empty bowls and soon replaced them with tea, fruit, butter, honey, and a platter of *blini*. Zhenya and Olga took their seats, gracefully transferring portions to their plates. They sliced their food with precise movements, even delicately spearing individual blueberries with their forks before placing them cleanly into their mouths. Though nothing smudged their lips, they frequently dabbed at their mouths with the napkins spread across their laps, as though performing a ritual.

Jongwoo watched the scene, utterly entranced. Taekjoo, however, looked on with thinly veiled irritation, muttering under his breath.

"Damn aristocrats."

Zhenya's gaze suddenly snapped to him, their eyes locking. Taekjoo's heart skipped a beat—had Zhenya understood him? But instead of reacting verbally, Zhenya's demeanor shifted oddly. His movements grew slower and more deliberate, as if to say, *If you're going to stare, then by all means, enjoy the show.* It was so exaggerated that it bordered on mockery. Unexpectedly, it was Olga who took offense.

"Taekjoo, did you just curse?"

"What? Who's cursing? You're making stuff up."

"Sure sounded like it. The tone, the nuance…"

Olga turned to Jongwoo for confirmation, narrowing her eyes as if she could read the truth from his face. Jongwoo stammered awkwardly, trying to defuse the tension.

"Well, technically, it wasn't *really* cursing. Haha."

"Hmm…"

Olga still looked unconvinced but decided not to press further. Sipping her tea, she turned to her brother and asked brusquely.

"You still have that yacht we used before, right?"

"What's this about?"

“Well, the weather’s perfect today—clear skies, nice breeze. We’re in Greece, so why not enjoy a yacht tour?”

“You’re speaking nonsense. Did you forget why we’re here?”

“As if! It’s for Taekjoo’s recovery, isn’t it? But recovery doesn’t mean lying around like a corpse all day. If someone like him is stuck indoors too long, he’ll either lose his mind or run away. Isn’t that right, Taekjoo?”

Olga shot Taekjoo a pleading look, as if silently begging him to nod in agreement. At the same time, Zhenya quietly set down his fork and knife, fixing his gaze on Taekjoo. Somehow, Taekjoo felt that if he agreed to Olga’s suggestion, Zhenya might go along with it too—though he had no rational basis for this feeling.

“Uh, a yacht tour? Sounds fine to me. I might not be ready for swimming yet, but I’m moving around more easily, and with weather like this, it’d be nice to get some fresh air.”

Zhenya let out a noncommittal grunt, his expression clearly unenthusiastic. Olga, however, didn’t give him a chance to protest.

“If you don’t want to come, just hand over the keys. We’ll go without you.”

Without a word, Zhenya stood up, giving Taekjoo a long, measured look before leaving the kitchen. His reaction was ambiguous—was he agreeing to the plan or silently opposing it? Taekjoo exchanged confused glances with Jongwoo, but Olga clapped her hands together and beamed.

“Great! It’s settled. Both of you, get ready.”

“Huh? That guy didn’t even give a clear answer.”

“What are you talking about? Of course he agreed.”

Were we even in the same room? Taekjoo thought. He recalled how Zhenya had said nothing in response to Olga’s suggestion that he hand over the keys if he didn’t want to join. All Zhenya had done was look at him silently, sigh faintly, and leave. How was Olga so sure that counted as agreement?

“When did he say yes?”

“Well, he didn’t say ‘no’ or ‘absolutely not,’ did he? That sigh of his? It was his way of conceding. It’s a positive response, trust me.”

Olga explained with an exaggerated shrug. Her confidence in deciphering Zhenya’s cryptic signals was baffling. Taekjoo shook his head in disbelief. How had he ended up so infatuated with someone so reserved and unreadable? Was he really dating this man? Or had their relationship been purely physical all along? *No, no,* Taekjoo chastised himself, shaking off the absurd thought. *What am I even thinking? This is ridiculous. The idea of sleeping with a guy… Is that even possible?* The sheer incongruity of it all made him feel like the universe itself was playing a cruel joke on him.

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Chapter End Notes

Support the author by purchasing the novel on Ridibooks.

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[1]: Here, Taekjoo uses the word "새끼" (saekki) to refer to Jongwoo and, despite having different meanings depending on the context, let's remember Zhenya thinks the word means "baby", which is why he's so angry in this scene, haha.

Until It's Done

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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The group retreated to their rooms to prepare. Olga, who somehow needed 30 minutes just to add a hat and sunglasses to her outfit, joined them last. Until then, Zhenya was nowhere to be seen, leaving Taekjoo to wonder if this was his way of silently bowing out. Just as Taekjoo was about to assume as much, Zhenya appeared.

He was wearing a blue shirt and white shorts that ended just above his knees. His bangs, combed forward to cover his forehead, made him look noticeably younger. His skin was radiant, almost glowing, as if he'd just applied something to it. Despite his evident annoyance at the outing, his meticulous appearance rivaled Olga's.

Before Taekjoo realized it, he was staring at Zhenya, utterly entranced.

"Let's go."

Zhenya said, sliding on his sunglasses. Taekjoo snapped out of it as if cold water had been splashed on him.

"Oh, uh, yeah. Coming."

Taekjoo stammered, flustered. He picked up his pace, moving so quickly on his crutches that it nearly matched his usual stride. At times, his crutches didn't even touch the ground, though he was too preoccupied to notice.

The group drove to a nearby marina, where a massive yacht loomed into view. It was so large that it dominated the landscape, impossible to miss. Taekjoo estimated its worth to be in the hundreds of billions of won. Yet Zhenya and Olga treated it with the casualness one might reserve for a car—just another reminder of how far removed their world was from his.

“Come on, hurry up!”

“Yes, coming, Miss Olga!”

Olga called out gleefully. Jongwoo replied, rushing after her. He immediately took on the role of her personal photographer, snapping photo after photo as she struck various poses. Taekjoo clicked his tongue at the scene, shaking his head. He was just about to lift himself onto his crutches when, out of nowhere, his body was hoisted into the air. Zhenya’s distinct scent enveloped him, his arms holding Taekjoo effortlessly.

“What the—hey!” Taekjoo yelped, freezing up in shock. His entire body tensed instinctively, which must have made him heavier, but Zhenya carried him as if he weighed nothing.

“Put me down! People are watching!”

“Even if you’ve lost your memory, your sense of shame remains intact, Taekjoo.”

“What nonsense are you spouting now? I’m embarrassed, that’s all.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

Zhenya tilted his head, as if genuinely puzzled, then firmly carried Taekjoo onto the yacht. Ignoring Taekjoo’s protests to be put down now that they were aboard, Zhenya strode toward the bow. There, he gently set Taekjoo down on a cushioned sofa where a soft breeze blew.

For a moment, their eyes met at close range. Zhenya’s ivory-colored hair glimmered in the sunlight, swaying gently in the wind. His blue eyes seemed particularly clear, almost piercing. He lowered his gaze slightly, causing his long, dark lashes to flutter like wings caught in the breeze. God, he’s so pretty...

“Jongwoo! Over here, here!”

Just as Taekjoo found himself getting lost in the strangely intimate moment, Olga’s voice cut through the air. Startled, Taekjoo quickly shoved Zhenya’s shoulder and turned his head. Moments later, Olga and Jongwoo approached, chattering noisily as they made their way over.

Olga clutched the brim of her oversized hat, which looked like it might take flight at any moment, and sat down in a spot with a perfect view of the sea. She immediately began shifting poses, fully immersed in taking pictures while everyone else looked on. Now that he thought about it, her proposal for the yacht tour, which had initially seemed considerate, was probably just an excuse to indulge herself. She’d needed an entourage for her photo-op.

Shaking his head, Taekjoo glanced at Zhenya. The chill he’d vaguely sensed earlier seemed to radiate from Zhenya, who was glaring at his sister with a frosty expression. His clenched fists made his fury even more obvious. Taekjoo reached out and patted his hand lightly.

“Hey, hey. She’s your sister, your younger sister.”

Zhenya's gaze dropped to where Taekjoo's hand rested on his own. The murderous glare he'd directed at Olga melted away in an instant.

When it came to Taekjoo, Zhenya always seemed oddly docile, his reactions unguarded, almost innocent. It was like training a puppy, really.

On a whim, Taekjoo patted the seat next to him. Without hesitation, Zhenya sat down, then fixed his eyes on Taekjoo as if waiting for his next command.

"That's… nice. Getting out like this."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I've been stuck inside for days, and it feels good to have a change of scenery."

"Hm."

Zhenya didn't add much, simply gazing at Taekjoo's profile with quiet interest. His unrelenting stare made the skin on Taekjoo's cheek tingle for no reason at all.

Before long, the yacht set sail. The vessel was so large that even the waves barely caused any vibrations. A refreshing breeze caressed their skin, threading through their hair and soothing their scalps. Hearing the gentle clink of liquid, Taekjoo turned his head to see Zhenya pouring whiskey into a glass. For some reason, his eyes were drawn to Zhenya's lips as they met the rim of the glass. He watched, almost mesmerized, as Zhenya's throat moved with languid ease while he drank, the faint aroma of whiskey wafting through the air. Taekjoo swallowed dryly without realizing it.

"Why? Want a sip?"

Zhenya extended the glass he'd been drinking from, offering it without hesitation.

Taekjoo hesitated. His thigh wound hadn't fully healed, and the doctor had emphasized over and over the importance of avoiding alcohol and cigarettes. But just one sip wouldn't hurt, right? Nodding almost instinctively, he accepted the glass. The whiskey swirled in his mouth before he swallowed it slowly, its rich flavor lingering on his tongue.

"You've got good taste."

"Of course."

Zhenya flashed a grin, pouring himself another glass. He lightly clinked his glass against Taekjoo's with a playful smirk. Taekjoo couldn't help but chuckle as he swirled the amber liquid in his glass.

"Rich people's lives all seem the same, don't they? Build luxury villas in sunny, picturesque places, treat yachts like personal cars, and fly private jets around like it's nothing."

"It's not just indulgence. You never know where or how you'll become a target, so you keep multiple safehouses. Yachts and private jets are the most secure and private business spaces

you can have."

The way he said it made it sound as though these private spaces—villas, yachts, and jets—weren't just for leisure but for orchestrating all kinds of illicit activities. Thinking about Matías, Taekjoo suspected Zhenya wasn't far off.

How did he end up with such a villainous lover? Before this, hadn't he always been drawn to people who didn't leave behind trouble? Sure, Zhenya's looks were undeniably attractive, but at the end of the day, he was still a man—and not just any man, but one significantly larger than Taekjoo himself. Even in a drunken haze, shouldn't some basic instinct have made him stop?

As Taekjoo stared silently, lost in thought, Zhenya raised an eyebrow with a curious expression.

"Why are you looking at me like that, Taekjoo? Do you like what you see?"

Taekjoo frowned at Zhenya's smugness, utterly devoid of any self-consciousness.

"What nonsense. Every time I look at you, I can't help but think how adventurous I must've been in the past."

"Is that so? Did something finally come back to you?"

"Not yet. I'm working on it."

Taekjoo downed the rest of his whiskey. Once the glass touched his lips, resisting another sip became a challenge he couldn't win.

Before long, the yacht anchored in place. Olga and Jongwoo were busy exploring every nook and cranny of the vessel, leaving Taekjoo and Zhenya to enjoy their drinks in peace. They didn't exchange many words, but just sitting side by side like this wasn't bad at all.

The crystal-clear water reflected everything down to its depths, dotted here and there with white yachts. Beyond the harbor, layers of stark white buildings stacked atop each other, crowned with vivid blue rooftops beneath a sky just as azure. It was a scene straight out of a postcard, so picturesque it seemed unreal. As they basked in the tranquil luxury, the chaos of being on the run just days ago felt like a distant memory.

How much time had passed? Zhenya, who had been silently watching Taekjoo as if trying to bore a hole through him, suddenly stood. It seemed like an important call had come through. He stepped away to take the call, and for the first time, his usually impassive face softened. Was Zhenya actually capable of smiling? The transformation was so startling that Taekjoo found himself blinking in disbelief. Zhenya continued the call with a relaxed grin, his tone uncharacteristically gentle.

Who could he possibly be talking to? It didn't seem like a business call—Zhenya didn't get this soft for work matters. Taekjoo's ears perked up involuntarily, curiosity getting the better

of him. Then, Zhenya turned around and met his gaze, catching him red-handed. Panicking, Taekjoo cleared his throat awkwardly and looked away.

Moments later, Zhenya approached him. The call wasn't over yet. Was he about to ask Taekjoo to give him some space for privacy? Bracing himself for such a request, Taekjoo watched Zhenya's movements carefully. Instead, Zhenya unexpectedly held out his phone.

"Here, take it."

"What? Who is it?"

Without answering, Zhenya tilted his head toward the device, urging him to take it. Taekjoo frowned, suspicious, but accepted the phone. Glancing at the screen, he saw the contact name written in Russian: *Little Woman.* Who on earth could that be?

"Hello? This is Taekjoo speaking."

"Oh, Taekjoo, is that you?"

To his surprise, it was his mother's voice on the other end. His eyes widened as he shot Zhenya a questioning look. The man stood there, arms crossed, watching him with a smug expression, his chin tilted upward in an infuriatingly proud manner. Taekjoo's heart raced at the unexpected call, but he forced himself to respond calmly.

"Oh, hi, Mom. Is something the matter?"

"What kind of question is that? Do you know how relieved I am to finally hear your voice? You said you'd be hard to reach for a while, but this long without any news? I've been so worried! Thank goodness I was able to get in touch with the ambassador, or I'd have gone crazy thinking something had happened to you."

Her scolding was relentless. Taekjoo winced, gripping the phone tighter. He wanted to explain, but Zhenya's constant surveillance had made contacting her impossible. That, and the fact that Zhenya had somehow managed to destroy even Jongwoo's phone. He shot Zhenya a glare, but the man only shrugged, as if completely innocent of any wrongdoing.

"I've just been... busy with work. How have you been, Mom? Everything okay on your end?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Your aunt's doing much better too. She's been pestering me to get you to visit once your work settles down. She keeps saying it's been too long since she's seen you. Do you think the ambassador would like Canada? You should bring him along when you visit. It'd be nice to meet him."

Her tone was cheerful and animated, a stark contrast to the anxious worry she'd usually express after long periods of silence. It seemed Zhenya's efforts at damage control had been effective. Despite himself, Taekjoo couldn't help but feel a little grateful—and impressed. According to Jongwoo, Zhenya had made himself a regular visitor at their family home, to the point of becoming her "new best friend." It was annoyingly endearing.

"I'll ask him. Things are mostly settled here anyway. Once everything's completely quiet, I'll either head back to Korea or come get you, so don't worry too much, okay?"

"Alright. That's what the ambassador said too. Honestly, as long as you're with him, I feel at ease."

Taekjoo couldn't help but wonder: how exactly did his mother and Zhenya communicate? Had his mom somehow picked up Russian? Or was Zhenya secretly fluent in Korean? Whenever Zhenya was around Jongwoo or Olga, they primarily spoke in English. And whenever Jongwoo whispered something in Korean, Zhenya would glare at them suspiciously, clearly not understanding a word.

"I'll call again soon, Mom. Stop worrying about me so much and take care of yourself first."

"Alright. I'll call you too. Oh, and send my regards to the ambassador."

"Yes, I will. Take care."

With that, he ended the call and handed the phone back to Zhenya, who raised an eyebrow, clearly curious about the conversation.

"She said to send her regards. Also, once things settle here, she wants us to visit Canada together."

Zhenya smirked and glanced at his phone, even though the call had long since ended. The look on his face was so soft and affectionate, anyone watching might assume *he* was the one in a relationship with Taekjoo's mom. Seeing his warm, almost tender expression made Taekjoo feel oddly flustered.

"Come to think of it, how good is your Korean? It feels like I'm always the one struggling with Russian."

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know? You must be pretty good, considering you managed a whole conversation with my mom. You've been the Russian ambassador to Korea for two years, right? By now, you'd have picked up the language. And my mom's definitely not fluent in Russian."

"You don't always need words to understand each other."

"What kind of nonsense is that? Come on, you really don't know any Korean?"

"Taekjoo."

"That's my name."

"Mother?"

Zhenya muttered hesitantly. It seemed he had been paying close attention whenever Taekjoo referred to his mom. Judging by his pronunciation, Zhenya's claim of not knowing Korean seemed genuine. Then how did he manage to communicate with her, even having frequent phone conversations? Was it in English? But Taekjoo's mother wasn't exactly fluent in that either.

As he puzzled over this, Zhenya suddenly said an unexpected word.

"Saekki."

"...What?"

Taekjoo stared at him, utterly dumbfounded. Was this how it felt to have a foreigner curse at you right to your face? Zhenya murmured the word "saekki" as if it were something sweet and meaningful. Could it be that they had been casually throwing around insults like *this bastard* or *that bastard* during their relationship? Surely not. Taekjoo didn't think even he was that shameless.

"Hyung."

While Taekjoo was still reeling, Zhenya pointed a finger at him and said another word. Of course, Taekjoo already knew he was older than Zhenya, so the term wasn't surprising in itself. But coming from Zhenya, with that particular expression on his face, the word *hyung* suddenly made every little hair on Taekjoo's neck stand on end.

"Hmm. Is that all?"

"Why would I bother learning more Korean?"

Did Zhenya think Taekjoo learned Russian out of some deep fascination with the language?

"Wow, you've worked so hard. So impressive it brings tears to my eyes. Truly."

Taekjoo's sarcasm was met with an unexpected reaction. Zhenya tilted his chin slightly upward, squared his shoulders, and puffed out his chest, looking for all the world like he was basking in praise. Even the corners of his mouth twitched as if resisting a full-blown grin. Was Taekjoo seeing things, or had Zhenya completely misinterpreted the mockery as genuine admiration?

Before he could process the absurdity of the moment, Olga approached them. She seemed to have finally tired of her relentless photo-taking spree.

"Taekjoo! Come play with us."

"You two play by yourselves."

"What's the point of coming all the way out on a yacht if you're just going to sit there?"

"What else can I do? I'm injured. Can't go swimming, and even the spa's a hassle."

“Hmm. Then how about we have a fishing contest?”

“Fishing?”

“Yeah. That doesn’t have anything to do with your leg.”

Olga turned to Zhenya, as if seeking his agreement. Zhenya, however, looked less than pleased about their private time being interrupted. The frown on his face didn’t seem like it was going to fade anytime soon. Undeterred, Olga pressed on with her idea for the fishing contest.

“It’s a bet! Whoever catches the most fish in an hour gets to make the others do whatever they say!”

“Ooh, like a king’s game!”

Yoon Jongwoo, who had somehow caught up with them, eagerly chimed in. A bet? And the winner could make everyone else do their bidding? Now that was an interesting proposition.

“What do you think?”

Taekjoo glanced at Zhenya to gauge his reaction. Judging by how the stormy expression in his eyes had calmed a bit, it seemed the terms of the bet intrigued him. Zhenya quickly made up his mind.

“Fine. But no whining or backing out if you lose.”

Taekjoo could already picture the chaos that would ensue if Zhenya won. Would Olga and Jongwoo end up being thrown into the sea on the spot? Jongwoo had no chance of winning, and if Olga did, who knew what kind of bizarre demands she’d come up with? For the sake of everyone’s dignity and peace, Taekjoo decided he had to win.

“Alright, I’ll ask them to get the equipment ready. Everyone, meet at the stern!”

With that, Olga unilaterally declared the plan and disappeared into the cabin. It seemed she was going to change into something more fitting for a fishing contest.

Taekjoo once again pushed against Zhenya's chest as the latter tried to scoop him up. Their eyes met in the process, and Taekjoo shook his head before grabbing Zhenya's arm.

“Just hold me like this.”

Zhenya, as if witnessing something out of the ordinary, stared at Taekjoo's hand gripping his arm.

“Let’s go.”

With a light tug on Zhenya's arm, Taekjoo prompted him to help him up. Zhenya complied, using his strength to pull Taekjoo to his feet. Balancing on one crutch with one hand while

holding onto Zhenya's arm with the other, Taekjoo made his way to the stern of the yacht. Despite the considerable distance, the support made the journey manageable.

At the designated spot, four fishing rods were already set up. A tall chair had been prepared as well, likely for Taekjoo's convenience. While attaching the bait in silence, Olga made her appearance. As expected, she was decked out in full fishing-appropriate attire from head to toe.

"What, are you here for a fashion show?"

"Ever heard of TPO?"

Olga brushed off Taekjoo's jab effortlessly. Another crewmember took care of attaching the bait to her fishing rod, allowing her to take up the rod with a confident grip.

"No mercy, Taekjoo."

"Just don't come crying later."

Taekjoo retorted with a dry tone, his disbelief evident. Olga responded by blowing the whistle around her neck and casting her line into the water with dramatic flair. It wasn't surprising. Soon enough, the three men followed suit, casting their lines into the clear waters below.

The sea was teeming with activity; schools of fish darted back and forth, visible beneath the surface. Before long, the float on Taekjoo's line bobbed sharply. With swift reflexes, he hooked the fish and reeled it in with practiced efficiency. In no time, a vibrantly patterned fish broke through the water, flailing at the end of his line.

He unhooked the wriggling fish and tossed it into the bucket, smirking exaggeratedly at his competitors. Zhenya and Olga turned away with a dismissive huff, while Jongwoo looked on with admiration.

Fishing wasn't new to Taekjoo. As a child, he often accompanied his father and older brother on fishing trips. On lucky days, they'd catch so many fish they'd let the live ones go. Whenever he caught a particularly large fish, he'd regale his mother with childish tales of his triumph for days on end. Even if the mind forgets, the body remembers.

Taekjoo's solo performance continued unabated, an unstoppable streak of success. The moment his line hit the water, fish as large as his forearm were caught, and occasionally, he even pulled up three at a time. It was almost as if he were performing some kind of magic trick.

Watching him with growing frustration, Olga finally voiced her suspicions.

"Wait a second, Taekjoo! What did you do to the bait?"

"It's always the amateurs blaming their tools. See? You should know your opponent before you challenge them."

“Something’s definitely off here. Why is it only Taekjoo catching fish?”

“This is what we call “fishing luck,” my dear. You should stick to posing pretty instead of playing games with the pros.”

Taekjoo clicked his tongue in mock pity at the three empty-handed competitors. His bucket was already overflowing. The latest addition to his haul flopped so vigorously that some fish spilled onto the deck.

“There must be a big coral reef over there! Switch places with me!”

“Really? Picking on an injured man? How low can you go?”

“And milking the "injured" card when it suits you isn’t low?”

Taekjoo waved her off nonchalantly, agreeing to the swap with an amused shrug. Meanwhile, Jongwoo finally managed to land a fish, though it was barely the size of his palm. Yet, even with the new spot, Olga’s rod remained eerily still.

Zhenya, too, was having no luck. Unlike Olga, who was growing more flustered by the minute, Zhenya simply stared intently at the ocean, paying no heed to Taekjoo’s smug remarks or Olga’s complaints. But staring wasn’t going to make fish magically jump onto the hook. Clearly, the siblings had grown up in a bubble, lacking any real-world survival skills.

The outcome was as good as decided.

“Hey, isn’t it about time to wrap this up?”

“...Shh.”

Zhenya’s low whisper silenced Taekjoo instinctively. A moment later, a violent splash broke the surface of the water. Zhenya yanked his rod with all his strength, the fishing line bending so sharply it seemed on the verge of snapping.

Taekjoo, Jongwoo, and Olga froze, their eyes fixed on him. Without changing his stoic expression, Zhenya methodically reeled in the line, locked in a fierce struggle with whatever was at the other end. Just as Taekjoo was debating whether to intervene, Zhenya braced himself and gave one powerful pull. A massive creature erupted from the water, thrashing wildly as it soared through the air. Water droplets sprayed in every direction, forcing the group to shield their faces. Before Taekjoo could fully process what was happening, the colossal fish hurtled toward him, and he instinctively caught it in his arms.

“Ack!”

The fish in Taekjoo’s arms thrashed violently, displaying an almost indomitable vitality. Its powerful tail fin smacked against his jaw and chest repeatedly. Unable to hold on, he dropped it to the deck, where it flopped and thudded about with alarming force. Jongwoo and Olga screamed, hopping backward in panic.

The chaos on the deck only subsided after Taekjoo pinned the fish down with his crutch, and Zhenya swiftly drove a sharp knife into its gills. A single, decisive blow ended its struggle. Blood poured from the lifeless fish as Taekjoo removed his crutch, his face twisted into a grimace of disgust.

“Wow! Isn’t this a bluefin tuna? Do these really show up here? It’s at least a meter long!”

Jongwoo, who had been shrieking in fear moments earlier, now gawked at the fish with awe and salivated as he chattered away. His guess was likely correct—the fish Zhenya had caught was a northern bluefin tuna, a species usually found far out in open seas. How it ended up here near the coast was anyone’s guess.

“And who was it that claimed to have fishing luck?”

Zhenya puffed out his chest, smugly reveling in his triumph. Despite his handsome features, the expression was so irritating that Taekjoo was tempted to punch him.

“Still, Taekjoo won this round. By both quantity and weight, no one can argue, right?”

Clapping her hands, Olga declared the winner. Zhenya’s face darkened slightly, but he didn’t protest. Instead, he crossed his arms, casting an amused and curious glance at Taekjoo.

“So, what do you want, Taekjoo?”

“Hmm. I might need some time to think about that.”

“Just to be clear, asking me to send you back to Korea is off the table.”

Taekjoo hadn’t planned on making any outrageous requests, but Zhenya’s preemptive strike irritated him. The way Zhenya spoke, as if he could see right through Taekjoo’s thoughts, only added fuel to the fire.

“What are you talking about? I’m hungry. Let’s eat something first.”

“Then I’ll tell them to prepare a meal. I’m going to shower first.”

Olga waved her hand dismissively and disappeared into the cabin. Zhenya, meanwhile, removed his gloves and turned his gaze to Taekjoo, who remained standing idly.

“What?”

“Aren’t you going to shower?”

Getting splashed with water while fishing was par for the course. Considering they were spending time on a yacht, Taekjoo figured his clothes would get wet again anyway. Why Zhenya felt the need to act so fastidiously neat was beyond him. Annoyed, Taekjoo waved him off.

“You go first. I’ll rest a bit longer.”

“Suit yourself.”

With that, Zhenya walked off without any argument. Meanwhile, Jongwoo’s attention remained glued to the bluefin tuna Zhenya had caught.

"Do Russians eat tuna as sashimi too? They wouldn’t cook such a beauty, right? Where’s the chili paste when you need it?"

"Forget the chili paste nonsense and come here."

"Okay, but is it okay to just leave it lying here like this?"

Clearly enchanted by the tuna, Jongwoo was moving even more sluggishly than usual. Taekjoo, growing exasperated, grabbed the younger man by the ear and gave it a firm tug.

"Ow, ow, ow! Sunbae, that hurts!"

"Pull yourself together, you punk."

"What did I even do?!"

Jongwoo rubbed his burning ear, shooting Taekjoo a reproachful look. Taekjoo sighed heavily.

"Did you come here to fool around, or what?"

“Then why else would you be on a yacht if not to relax, huh? You think we're here to work?”

“Ha, you simple-minded brat.”

With a sigh, Taekjoo glanced around, scanning their surroundings. No one seemed to be paying particular attention to them. Even so, he leaned closer to Jongwoo and lowered his voice to a whisper.

“Have you tried contacting the boss?”

“...No. Mr. Yevgeny smashed my phone, remember? Plus, there’s no internet at the villa. He doesn’t even let us go out freely.”

“So you're just sitting around doing nothing? Why not ask Olga for help?”

“And what if that puts her in danger? You think Mr. Yevgeny would spare her just because she’s his sister?”

Jongwoo’s concerns weren’t entirely baseless. Judging from how Zhenya treated Olga, it wasn’t far-fetched to think he’d show her no mercy if she stepped out of line. Moreover, while Olga seemed more rational and kind compared to Zhenya, there was no guarantee she’d help them escape. Taekjoo, unable to remember much about Zhenya, had no recollection of Olga either, making it difficult to trust her blindly.

“Why don’t you just try confronting Mr. Yevgeny directly, Sunbae? I mean, he wouldn’t hurt his boyfriend, right?”

“Boyfr... Ha. If that bastard were willing to grant me any favors, he wouldn’t have shot down my request right after the fishing game. Bringing it up would just make things worse.”

“So what do we do then?”

“Do you think I joined in on this little sea-side outing for no reason?”

Jongwoo gave him a puzzled look. Taekjoo motioned for him to come closer, wrapping an arm around Jongwoo’s neck as he leaned in to whisper.

“When the time’s right, you’re going to get off here.”

“What? Get off here? You’re going to abandon me in the middle of the ocean again, aren’t you?!”

“...Again? When did I ever—?”

Taekjoo put on an expression of complete innocence. Naturally, given his memory loss, he had no recollection of what Jongwoo was referring to. However, to Jongwoo, his reaction was frustrating enough to make him choke on his own emotions. Jongwoo glared at him, his lips slightly pursed in defiance.

“Fine, let me explain the rest of my plan.” Taekjoo softened his expression before continuing.

“There’s an emergency boat on this yacht. Use that to get out of here. Head to the embassy or find another way to contact HQ. We need to coordinate how and when we’ll return; otherwise, this could all backfire. Let’s face it, Zhenya doesn’t seem like the type to let us go easily. And if this unauthorized leave drags on, it’ll create even bigger problems later. Right now, we’re essentially hanging out with a big shot in Russia’s underworld, and there’s no way HQ will see that as a good thing.”

Jongwoo pressed his lips together thoughtfully. Taekjoo had already been interrogated by HQ under suspicion of colluding with Zhenya. Although Jongwoo saw no reason to remind Taekjoo of that, given his memory loss, the idea of them being linked to Zhenya and Russian power circles was troubling.

“So, I’ll stay here and keep tabs on Zhenya while you make your move.”

“What excuse do I use to leave?”

“There are plenty of excuses. Say you have a stomachache or something.”

“You think they’ll buy that?”

“Make them believe it.”

“I can’t exactly fake diarrhea, you know.”

“But you can gag yourself and throw up, can’t you?”

“Sunbae!”

Jongwoo looked mortified, making Taekjoo chuckle as he patted him on the back. Whatever it took, Taekjoo had to ensure that Jongwoo got back to land. Staying close to Zhenya might offer temporary safety, but there was no telling what would happen next. Taekjoo couldn’t keep playing along just because Zhenya considered him his boyfriend.

Both he and Jongwoo had a place they needed to return to. Only then could Taekjoo complete the mission he had been entrusted with.

When he stepped out of the shower, a feast was already laid out. The table was filled with dishes, enhanced by fresh ingredients from the day's fishing trip. The sight alone was enough to make him feel full before even taking a bite.

As always, Olga appeared in yet another new look, her energy seemingly boundless despite the occasion. While TPO mattered, it was impressive how consistently she put effort into her presentation. Yoon Jongwoo picked up a piece of the bluefin tuna sashimi he had been yearning for and ate it with trembling delight. He’d let himself indulge for now, though he knew he’d have to blame an upset stomach later. Before that, it seemed wise to soften Zhenya’s mood a little. He picked up the wine bottle sitting nearby and offered it.

“Want some?”

“Sure.”

Zhenya replied casually, holding out his glass. Jongwoo poured wine into Zhenya’s glass and then started to pour his own. Before he could, Zhenya naturally took the bottle from him and filled Kwon Taekjoo’s glass instead. The smooth, fluid motion caught Jongwoo’s attention, and he found his gaze lingering.

They sipped their wine slowly, their eyes meeting over their glasses. Although Jongwoo had tasted this wine several times before, it somehow felt more fragrant than ever.

“Ah! Oh no!”

The moment broke when Olga suddenly cried out, startling everyone at the table. Jongwoo jumped in response, his eyes darting toward her.

“What’s wrong, all of a sudden?”

“I left my medicine back at the villa!”

“What medicine?”

“My angina medication. I have to take it on time.”

Jongwoo vaguely recalled hearing about Olga having a chronic illness. Was it a heart condition? For patients with heart disease, missing their medication was no small matter. A critical moment could arise at any time. If she really did leave her medicine behind, this was serious. Yet something about Olga's sudden panic seemed oddly off.

Jongwoo, who had been quietly observing from the side, suddenly chimed in with overly enthusiastic agreement.

"Oh no! That's terrible! What should we do? This could be serious! Should I go get it for you?"

"No, no. You don't even know where it is, Jongwoo. And no matter how urgent it is, I can't just have a strange man rummaging through a lady's room."

The exchange was so theatrical it felt like they were performing a comedy sketch. Zhenya's expression turned downright disdainful, his gaze sweeping over them with the air of someone wondering if they had eaten something rotten. Clearly, this was a situation Kwon Taekjoo himself would need to resolve.

"So careless. You should have packed that before worrying about your clothes."

"I know."

Olga said, her face falling into a pitiful frown, her eyebrows drooping like wilting flowers. Whatever game she was playing, Jongwoo seemed entirely complicit, though Zhenya had no idea what their true intentions were.

"Maybe I should go by myself. But it's so scary... what should I do?"

"I'll come with you, Miss Olga!"

"Oh, would you really? But if we go back, it'll be hard to return. I'd ruin the yacht tour for everyone."

"It's fine! Besides... my stomach's been feeling a little upset anyway. I think I might have an issue."

"Really? Oh no, you should see a doctor immediately! People die of food poisoning, you know!"

Their awkward back-and-forth continued, more painful to witness than the clumsiest of kindergarten plays. Zhenya watched with mounting exasperation before finally turning to Kwon Taekjoo.

"What do you think? Should we go back?"

Caught off guard, Taekjoo instinctively grabbed Zhenya's sleeve, making him blink in surprise. Flustered, he let out a nervous laugh and tried to smooth things over.

"There's no need for us all to go back, is there?"

“...”

“I mean, we’ve come all this way... and the sunset here is supposed to be beautiful.”

Taekjoo shifted his gaze awkwardly to the side as he added another comment, his cheeks prickling with embarrassment. It wasn’t even an especially bold thing to say, yet he felt self-conscious, especially with Olga watching him from across the table, her eyes sparkling with amusement. The way she stared made him even more flustered.

“Hm. So you want to spend time alone with me that badly?”

Zhenya quipped, dropping his neutral expression and twisting his lips into a smug grin. He tilted his chin upward and spread his chest slightly, exuding an air of confidence that was, frankly, infuriating.

Kwon Taekjoo clicked his tongue quietly, irritation flickering in his eyes. He shot Jongwoo a sharp look, silently urging him to leave. Jongwoo nodded quickly, stuffing his mouth with a generous piece of bluefin tuna belly before rising from his seat. Olga followed suit, saying something about getting ready, and gracefully disappeared into the cabin.

Soon enough, only Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya remained at the table. Zhenya rested his chin on one hand, leaning his whole body toward Kwon Taekjoo and studying his face intently. It was as if Zhenya’s gaze could pierce holes wherever it landed, making Taekjoo shift uncomfortably. He fidgeted, trying to maintain his composure and keep any hidden emotions from slipping through.

“A quiet evening together... not bad, right?”

“Mm, a quiet evening together.”

Zhenya echoed, savoring the words. The anticipation lighting up Zhenya’s face pricked at Taekjoo’s conscience, just a little.

Zhenya seemed completely absorbed, his eyes fixed on Taekjoo with unwavering intensity. Then, without warning, he stood up and left, not even bothering to say where he was going. *Bathroom?* Taekjoo guessed, watching Zhenya vanish. Left alone, he sipped his wine and nibbled on the remaining food, using the moment to plan ahead.

He figured he needed to buy Jongwoo some time—at least half a day—so he could reach land and move freely. Sooner or later, he would also need to have a serious and candid conversation with Zhenya. If Zhenya really was his lover, and Taekjoo couldn’t remember any of it, they’d have to decide together how to move forward.

Before long, Olga and Jongwoo emerged onto the deck, ready to disembark. Taekjoo stood up to see them off.

“Don’t worry about us. You two enjoy your quiet time.”

“Why would I worry about you? Just go already.”

“Oh? Playing tough again, I see.”

“I’m not playing. I mean it. Get lost.”

“So eager to spend time alone with your boyfriend, huh?”

“Shut up.”

Taekjoo shot back, his face twisting in mild disgust. Olga only laughed, her amusement genuine as she leaned in, her half-lidded eyes scanning his reaction like she was probing for secrets.

“Let me guess, you’re wondering if that really could be your boyfriend? Thinking, *How on earth did I fall for someone like that?*”

“Did you take up mind-reading or something?”

“Please. Mind-reading’s hardly necessary. Sure, he’s only got his looks going for him, but if anyone could tame him, it’d be you. He’s unpredictable, always scheming something, impossible to read, and sulks like a spoiled kid. Honestly, he’s just a big child who thinks showing his feelings is a sign of weakness, so when he’s upset, he throws tantrums instead.”

“Tantrums? With the way he acts, two tantrums would be enough to wreck an entire house.”

“Exactly. But still, brave hero, I’m counting on you to make it another happy ending this time.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You’ll see.”

She said with a cryptic smile, clearly enjoying his confusion. The audacity—whether it came from her or her brother—was irritating.

Taekjoo nudged her toward the edge of the deck, eager to send her on her way. Just as they were about to board, six motorboats were lowered into the water, the staff boarding them one by one. Startled, he turned to Zhenya, who had appeared at just the right moment.

“What’s all this?”

“You said you wanted to be alone with me, Taekjoo.”

“What?”

Taekjoo blinked in disbelief. That wasn’t *exactly* what he had meant. Well, maybe it was, but not *like this*. It seemed Zhenya had completely misunderstood—or perhaps deliberately twisted—his earlier words. Either way, it was too late to argue.

“See you tomorrow, Sunbae!”

The supposedly ill Yoon Jongwoo stepped off the yacht with a confident stride, waving his arms enthusiastically. Olga followed close behind, winking repeatedly.

"Well, we'll head out first. You two take your time, have a nice chat, and enjoy yourselves."

"Stop babbling and get lost."

Zhenya said, narrowing his eyes in exasperation. Olga smirked and gave a mocking *"Hmph!"* before hopping off the yacht. Six boats slowly began to move away from the vessel. Taekjoo shot Yoon Jongwoo a meaningful look, silently urging him to remember his instructions. Jongwoo nodded solemnly, his expression determined.

As the sound of the boats' engines faded, the roar of the waves crashing against the yacht grew louder, filling the air. Taekjoo, now looking only at Zhenya's back, called out, *"Let's go up."*

Without warning, Zhenya swept Taekjoo off his feet again as he awkwardly tried to take the lead. It caught him off guard, but with no one watching and the convenience of it all, he decided not to protest.

It turned out Zhenya was an unexpectedly caring and devoted partner. He had settled in Korea, a country where he had no ties, just to be close to Taekjoo. He'd helped ease Taekjoo's mother's concerns, searched far and wide when his whereabouts were unknown, brought him food suited to his tastes, and paid close attention to his every glance and gesture.

Suddenly, Taekjoo understood a little more why Zhenya seemed hurt about not being remembered. After doing so much, it wasn't unreasonable to feel it was unfair for his partner to forget everything and even try to keep his distance. For some reason, Taekjoo felt a twinge of guilt. Zhenya seemed pitiable.

Zhenya gently placed Taekjoo down onto a soft lounger in a cozy open-air cabana. As he drew closer, Taekjoo found himself gazing at Zhenya's face. His bangs fell stubbornly over his eyes, and, almost instinctively, Taekjoo brushed them aside. It was such a simple gesture, but Zhenya slowly shifted his gaze, studying Taekjoo as if trying to decipher his intent. The vivid intensity of Zhenya's blue gaze, heavy with desire, was disconcerting.

"So... Olga told me. About you and me... being, you know, together."

Taekjoo began awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. Zhenya didn't look surprised. He simply met Taekjoo's gaze with a calm expression and replied.

"Yeah."

When Taekjoo sneaked another glance at him, Zhenya chuckled softly, his lips curving into a faintly teasing smirk.

"No wonder you've been so hesitant. You're only just now finding out?"

The mischievous glint in Zhenya's eyes and the playful tone of his voice bordered on mockery, yet somehow, he looked genuinely pleased.

“How long?”

“Three years.”

“What?!”

“Is that so surprising?”

“How did that even happen?”

“What kind of question is that?”

Zhenya furrowed his brow slightly, baffled by what part of his statement might have led to such a reaction.

“Well, I’ve never in my life been sexually attracted to another man. Not once. I can’t even imagine it now. So... what on earth did you do to me?”

Zhenya snorted, half amused, half incredulous.

“Wow, you’ve really forgotten it all. You were the one who grabbed onto me first.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

Zhenya spoke with unwavering certainty. Taekjoo stared at him, dumbfounded. *I was the one who made the first move?* Sure, Zhenya had a strikingly beautiful face, but his looks were undeniably masculine, and his imposing stature overshadowed any sense of delicacy. It was hard to believe that he’d willingly pursued someone like Zhenya.

Yet there it was. According to Zhenya, Taekjoo himself had been the instigator. *What the hell had happened?* It felt like a huge chunk of his life had gone missing. Three whole years of being in a relationship with Zhenya, and he had no idea where to even begin unraveling it all.

Zhenya, seeing Taekjoo’s mounting frustration, let out a deliberately exaggerated sigh and began lamenting in a tone that felt both theatrical and genuinely hurt.

“You were always like that. Treating me roughly, trying to dominate me, insisting that I belong entirely to you... yet refusing to stay by my side yourself. You always wanted to roam free while demanding that I endure it all.”

“Me? Really? Seriously?”

“What? Are you going to claim now that you don’t know? That you’ve forgotten everything and can just play dumb?”

Did I really treat Zhenya that harshly? Taekjoo’s mind suddenly conjured a vivid image of himself restraining Zhenya, using violence to subjugate him. Had he really been that reckless,

forcing Zhenya into submission, leaving him behind without a word, only to reappear later and repeat the same behavior? *Just how much of a trashy person was I?*

While Taekjoo didn't have a wealth of dating experience, he had always considered his relationships relatively ordinary—meeting, dating, and parting ways without major drama. The most common grievance from his past partners was that he didn't prioritize them enough, which often led to breakups. In those moments, Taekjoo had always respected their decisions and never clung to them. He could swear he had never treated anyone recklessly. But... was it possible he had acted that way because Zhenya was a man?

Grabbing his head in frustration, Taekjoo tried to push his limited imagination to its limits. *Was I drunk, impulsively captivated by his beauty? Or high, unable to distinguish between genders? Or maybe we were stranded somewhere, just the two of us, and my libido went haywire?* No matter how he framed it, the only plausible explanation was that he must have been in an altered state of consciousness.

And yet... if they'd dated for three years, surely that meant they'd been intimate. His gaze wandered back to Zhenya, studying him from head to toe once more. Zhenya, sensing the scrutiny, returned Taekjoo's look as if asking, *What else do you want to know?* Inevitably, Taekjoo's eyes were drawn to Zhenya's long lashes. His skin was flawless, his ears and fingertips a delicate flush of pink. He was undeniably attractive—but still, unmistakably male. The visible bulge at the front of his loose-fitting pants was hard to ignore.

Did I really get turned on by that? Taekjoo wondered, stunned. *Am I someone who could feel attracted to a man?* Maybe he'd just never met someone like Zhenya before, and that had triggered a belated realization.

"Taekjoo. I can hear the gears in your head grinding."

"I was just... trying to piece things together. A few fragments have started to come back, though. Just faint glimpses."

"Your memory is coming back?"

"Well, I can't say for sure that it's about you, but... I've had dreams where I'm dating someone or being physically close. The other person seemed to be a man."

"Are you telling me there was another guy?"

"No! Of course not. That's why I think it was you. Anyway… Does my mother know about us?"

"Who knows? But if that little woman were to find out, wouldn't she be thrilled? She does like me, after all."

"Little woman?"

"Yeah. Taekjoo, your mom said if you'd been born a girl, she'd want me as her son-in-law."

Zhenya replied with a sly smile, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

"You little punk! Are you seriously calling my mom a little woman ? What kind of manners is that, huh?"

Taekjoo snapped, his voice rising in disbelief. Zhenya's eyes widened momentarily before he burst into laughter, the sound clear and unrestrained. It took him a while to regain his composure. When he did, he murmured softly, almost to himself, *"Yeah. This is more like you."*

Taekjoo's heart pounded erratically, thudding against his chest like it had a mind of its own. *What the hell? Am I getting arrhythmia or something?*

By then, the sky had turned a golden hue. The sun dipped lower, scattering countless sparkles of light across the water. Taekjoo fell silent, his gaze drawn to the breathtaking view. Zhenya said nothing either, merely observing the soft, reddish glow that painted Taekjoo's cheeks and the glint in his eyes as he watched the sunset.

"I'm going to have to try really hard."

Taekjoo murmured quietly, his eyes fixed on the sunlit sea. When he turned to look at Zhenya, their eyes met immediately.

"I guess I never properly thanked you. For coming to save me."

Zhenya raised an eyebrow, his expression unreadable. Taekjoo grinned, a genuine smile that reached his eyes, and continued without hesitation.

"Yeah, suddenly. I thought I'd been abandoned, you know? That the burden was mine alone to bear. Honestly, I was at my limit. I didn't know who I was, everything around me was pure chaos, I was being hunted for reasons I couldn't understand, and my body kept giving out on me. I started wishing someone would come for me. Maybe I can't be certain because my memories are still a mess, but... I think that was the first time. The first time anyone ever came to save me."

When Zhenya had appeared at Matías's villa, Taekjoo had felt his heart race uncontrollably, yet at the same time, an inexplicable sense of calm had washed over him. He didn't know who Zhenya was or what their relationship had been, but for some reason, his heart had trusted him without question. Had it been otherwise, he doubted he would've willingly thrown himself into Zhenya's arms the way he had.

"So, thank you. For being so relentless in looking for me. For coming to get me in the end."

Zhenya, who had been silently watching Taekjoo, suddenly leaned in. Before Taekjoo could react, Zhenya cupped his face.

"Wait—!"

Taekjoo tried to pull back, but their noses brushed, and before he could evade, their lips pressed together firmly. Warm breath slipped through Zhenya's slightly parted lips. Neither of them closed their eyes, their gazes locking at an unnervingly close distance.

Zhenya’s eyes flitted between Taekjoo’s, as if seeking permission. After a brief hesitation, Taekjoo closed his eyes and yanked Zhenya’s collar toward him. In response, Zhenya surged forward, their lips locking more decisively. Their mouths meshed together completely, Zhenya pressing gentle kisses between longer, deeper ones. The sensations were overwhelming; Zhenya’s scent enveloped Taekjoo, dulling his senses in a strangely comforting haze.

He felt no aversion. On the contrary, something long-repressed flared up with alarming speed and intensity.

Taekjoo tangled his fingers in Zhenya’s hair, deepening the kiss as his tongue slid against Zhenya’s. Zhenya’s breathing grew heavier, his body temperature unmistakably rising. With an almost aching reverence, he alternated between sucking on Taekjoo’s tongue and his plump lower lip. The sweetness of their mingled saliva and the ragged exchange of breaths made Taekjoo’s limbs feel like they might give way.

“Hah... Taekjoo...”

“Mmh...”

Zhenya’s hand trailed up from Taekjoo’s waist, boldly cupping his chest, while his hips subtly but firmly pressed his heavy center against Taekjoo’s groin.

The weighty sensation of Zhenya grinding against him snapped Taekjoo’s eyes open. He blinked, momentarily dazed by the way Zhenya’s hair caught the fiery hues of the setting sun, glowing like molten gold. The same warm light bathed Zhenya’s broad shoulders and strong back. Using the brightness as an excuse, Taekjoo let his eyelids flutter shut again. *Since I’m already caught up in this, maybe it’s okay to indulge a little more.* Zhenya seemed to desperately want it, and, truthfully, Taekjoo didn’t mind it either.

He had never been particularly shy about physical contact. And since they’d apparently been lovers, perhaps reconnecting like this would help his forgotten memories resurface. With those justifications swirling in his mind, Taekjoo hesitated only a moment longer before grabbing Zhenya’s firm buttocks and pulling him closer. Zhenya let out a soft chuckle, his amusement evident.

The two eagerly rubbed their bodies together as their tongues intertwined. When that wasn't enough and they were both starting to pant, Zhenya's hand slipped inside Kwon Taekjoo's pants, wrapping around his cock. With a suction sound, Zhenya's lips moved down to Kwon Taekjoo's jaw and neck.

“Hmm, uhh...”

The large hand enveloped his whole shaft smoothly. His touch was as if he knew exactly how to touch so that Kwon Taekjoo would enjoy himself. Without realizing it, Kwon Taekjoo moved his hips forward, thrusting against Zhenya's hand. Each knuckle of his fingers became a point of stimulation, providing sweet pleasure. His temperature rose rapidly and he began to gasp for breath. His cheeks also blushed quickly.

Kwon Taekjoo slowly caressed Zhenya's ear, encouraging him. Zhenya raised his head, which was buried in Kwon Taekjoo's neck. Taekjoo stared at him as he lightly tugged at his ear. Zhenya let himself go and soon stretched his neck to kiss him again. Wrapping his arm around Zhenya's neck, he naturally positioned himself on top of him. When their lips parted, Zhenya lifted his head to kiss him once more. With a mischievous smile, he pressed Zhenya's shoulder.

“Come to think of it. I think I won that fishing bet.”

“Oh, right. You did.”

“And the winner gets to make the rules, doesn’t he?”

Taekjoo’s mischievous grin widened, his playful expression lighting up his face. Zhenya let out a small laugh, his eyes softening as he mirrored the smile.

“So it seems.”

Zhenya admitted, raising his hands in mock surrender, his tone laced with humor. Taekjoo's interest was piqued. Zhenya wasn’t usually this cooperative—it was rare to see him drop his guard so easily. Leaning closer, Taekjoo studied him for a moment before deciding to push his luck.

“Alright, open your mouth.”

Zhenya complied, parting his lips to reveal a set of perfectly even teeth, his sharp canines catching the light. Behind them, his tongue moved slightly, as if enticing Taekjoo with an unspoken invitation.

“And now... stick out your tongue.”

Taekjoo lightly tapped Zhenya's cheek with his fingertips. Zhenya chuckled softly, his lips curving up, before obediently sticking out his tongue without protest.

"Good. Now, don’t move and behave yourself."

Satisfied, Taekjoo leaned in and took Zhenya's tongue into his mouth, savoring its softness as he gave it a slow, deliberate pull before letting go. He immediately followed up by gliding his own tongue over Zhenya's, effortlessly taking the lead in the kiss. Zhenya's lips twitched faintly, betraying his amusement and enjoyment, while his closed eyes and fluttering lashes spoke of his heightened sensitivity.

Finding Zhenya's unguarded reactions endearing, Taekjoo brushed his thumb gently along Zhenya’s cheek. Every time he sucked or teased Zhenya's tongue, the tiny quivers of his long lashes made Taekjoo’s touch grow more tender, his dominance tinged with unexpected affection.

Zhenya let out a soft, throaty hum, responding by gently sucking on Taekjoo's tongue. Taekjoo allowed it for a moment, only to pull back and playfully trace the inside of Zhenya's upper lip with the tip of his tongue. The teasing continued as he pressed his tongue against

the area just above Zhenya’s lips, sending another wave of delicate tremors through Zhenya’s lashes as they lightly brushed against Taekjoo’s skin. It stirred a strange, possessive thrill within him.

"Mm... ah... ngh..."

Kwon Taekjoo continued with the deep kiss as he began to thrust harder, pushing his waist upward. Zhenya tightened his hand around Kwon Taekjoo's cock, squeezing it firmly. The smooth, solid shape of the fingers heightened his arousal.

Kwon Taekjoo's waist movements became more and more intense. His pelvis bumped sharply against Zhenya's hand, which squeezed and squeezed his cock gently while guiding him to climax. Zhenya would sensually whisper “Taekjoo,” repeatedly in his ear, and he would also place hot kisses on his ear and neck.

Suddenly, Zhenya's lips landed on Kwon Taekjoo's skin that had been bitten by a mosquito, sucking hard. The tingling sensation intensified, causing his shoulders to involuntarily shrink. Unfortunately, Zhenya's lips quickly parted. Then, Zhenya moved his lips from Kwon Taekjoo's shoulder to his chest, and began to lick around his nipple. The peculiar feeling, similar to a mosquito bite, spread up Kwon Taekjoo's spine. When Zhenya opened his mouth to suck both the bite and the nipple at the same time, Kwon Taekjoo leaned forward with force. The warm sensation slowly building up inside his cock became even more heavy, becoming thicker and denser.

“Haah, haah, uhh, mm, haah, ahhh...”

Kwon Taekjoo came apart into incoherent moans. Zhenya pulled his body closer to Kwon Taekjoo's, rubbing his abdomen with Kwon Taekjoo's cock and stroking his skin gently with his thumb. Kwon Taekjoo's shaft slid quickly between Zhenya's ripped abs. Kwon Taekjoo's quickened his movements, his cock almost reaching Zhenya's chin. The red opening of his urethra, swollen and filled with pre-seminal fluid, intensified the visual stimulation. Zhenya licked his own lower lip before tilting his head towards Kwon Taekjoo's cock.

“Uhh, uhh...”

Suddenly, Kwon Taekjoo's body tensed, and he ejaculated powerfully. He trembled violently as an intense shiver ran through his body, and he closed his eyes tightly. As he slowly opened them and looked at Zhenya, he noticed him blinking repeatedly, semen splashing on his face, running across his cheek, and apparently into his eyes.

“Hey, I'm sorry, are you okay?”

“...Taekjoo, looks like your body has been pretty needy all this time, hasn't it?”

“I suddenly got turned on... Let me see.”

“It's not anything new.”

Zhenya smiled softly, licking his wet lips. Then, he wiped the semen off his face with his hand and, without hesitation, licked it off. Kwon Taekjoo, horrified, shouted:

“Hey, why are you licking it?”

He grabbed him by the cheeks with one hand, demanding that he spit it out. Then, Zhenya pulled Kwon Taekjoo's arm and whispered into his ear, *"Come here."*

“Fortunately, your body seems to remember me.”

"Really?” thought Kwon Taekjoo, surprised by his own reaction. He had wondered if he would even be able to get aroused with a man, but, driven by the heat of the moment, he had not only achieved an erection, but also ejaculated. He knew that penetration would be a completely different matter, but at that moment, he felt that even that might be possible.

His body was still completely turned on, showing no signs of calming down. The only thing that puzzled him was how he should proceed. Should he treat Zhenya the same way he would treat a woman?

“What do we do next?”

“If you forgot, I'll teach you one by one again.”

Zhenya's soft whisper made the hairs on the back of Kwon Taekjoo's neck stand up, as his throat swallowed involuntarily. He nodded in response, moving closer to plant a series of kisses on Zhenya's cheek, while his fingers explored inside the latter's pants. Zhenya's stiffness was evident; his cock, now fully hardened, looked ready to explode. As he stroked it gently, he noticed how the wetness of pre-seminal fluid coated his hand almost immediately. Zhenya's imposing stature suggested that all of his parts would be equally large, but even so, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't help but feel slightly intimidated by the dimension of his cock. Still, he decided not to show it off, especially in front of someone who had not hesitated to lick his own semen minutes before.

As Kwon Taekjoo trailed kisses down Zhenya's neck, he kept stroking his cock, and Zhenya answered with soft moans that vibrated in his throat. It didn't sound so bad.

“Mmmm, Taekjoo.”

Zhenya, who was moaning in pleasure, unbuckled the belt of his own pants. Taekjoo wrapped his hand around Zhenya's cock again as the latter began to move insistently, thrusting his shaft against Kwon Taekjoo's palm. At the same time, Zhenya gripped Kwon Taekjoo's ass tightly. Suddenly, Kwon Taekjoo felt a strange and unfamiliar feeling that made his body tense up.

What is this? Taekjoo stiffened from an unexpected and odd sensation. For a moment, his hands paused. Noticing the hesitation, Zhenya slightly lifted his torso and, ran his tongue along Taekjoo's earlobe before whispering “Continue”, Taekjoo moved his hand again due to the uncomfortable feeling that he could even feel a slight metallic sound. Then, Zhenya continued to encourage Kwon Taekjoo by kissing his ear again and again.

Zhenya's hand, which was massaging Kwon Taekjoo's ass cheeks to his heart's content, little by little, went deep inside. He gently caressed the hidden hole inside. At that moment, Kwon Taekjoo shuddered and stiffened again.

“It's just like the first time.”

Zhenya, who was already aroused, laughed and pushed the tip of his tongue into Kwon Taekjoo's ear. He also traced more thoroughly the inside of the cleft between Kwon Taekjoo's buttocks. Kwon Taekjoo suddenly grabbed this hand.

“Wait.”

“Shh. It's okay, so relax.”

Zhenya cracked a crooked smile and continued to reassure Kwon Taekjoo, telling him that everything was fine. However, Taekjoo's stiff body didn't seem to relax at all. Instead, he was visibly trembling. Something was still building up inside him.

"When was the last time you cried? Today will be the new date."

The grim, dank images of the prison, the sound of the handcuffs echoing with every movement, the leering gazes watching him, and the feeling of excruciating torture he was experiencing came rushing back to his mind.

“When someone like you falls into my hands, there are two choices. Either you die for the hidden truth bursting inside you, or you will fall apart first.Which will be yours?”

A wave of nausea built up deep inside. His jaw tensed tightly.

“Don't.”

He squeezed Zhenya's wrist tighter, who kept touching him without stopping. Zhenya, not understanding the gravity of the situation, continued to kiss him relentlessly. The moment Zhenya's finger tried to penetrate him further, something inside Taekjoo rose up violently. It was as if a club, mercilessly striking him, had reached his throat and brain.

“...Get off me, you fucker!”

He screamed as he pushed Zhenya away from him. Zhenya, shocked and stunned, attempted to understand Taekjoo's state. Taekjoo's face was pale.

“...Taekjoo?”

Noticing something strange, Zhenya tried to touch him. Taekjoo roughly pulled his hand away and told him to leave. His body trembled like a willow tree in the wind.

“Taekjoo, what's wrong?”

“Don't come closer. Don't come closer...”

Taekjoo repeated endlessly, while covering his mouth with his hands. Then, with his body still in bad shape, he clumsily threw off the cavana. It wasn't long before he fell to his knees and sank to the ground.

“Taekjoo!”

When Zhenya tried to rush over, Kwon Taekjoo raised his hand in refusal. Then he staggered to his feet and walked toward the railing. When his feet got tangled again and he fell, he even dragged his body on all fours to the railing. Finally, he arrived in front of the railing and vomited up the contents of his stomach, swaying from side to side.

Zhenya hurried after him and grabbed him by the shoulders to turn him around. His eyes were glassy and lifeless.

“Taekjoo, what's wrong with you?”

Zhenya's worried voice mingled with another voice in the background.

“See how those tits are so big? They look like they're begging for me to suck on them.”

“You could experience how a person dies from this alone. You're going to die here today anyway.”

“If you want to walk out of this room with your two legs, you'd better cry and shake your hips, or scream like a dog in heat. It turns me on to see someone fearlessly defy me. I need to stomp on that lovely thing to feel satisfied.”

Fragments of unfamiliar memories seemed to shatter his mind. The pressure in his brain increased rapidly, triggering nausea again.

“Get off me! Get off me, you fucking son of a bitch! I'm going to kill you! I'm going to kill you all, you sons of bitches!”

“Zainka. Come to your senses...”

“Scream more, Zainka.”

“Goddamn it, fuck off!”

Zhenya received blows to his cheek and jaw from Taekjoo's aggressive movements. He tried to calm him down forcefully, but he only resisted with more intensity. His rough hands ripped and tore at his clothes.

“Damn it, damn it...!”

“Taekjoo!”

After a long period of irrational struggle, Taekjoo suddenly fainted. Zhenya, frightened, slapped him on the cheek, but he did not regain consciousness.

“Taekjoo, Taekjoo...”

Zhenya, in a state of chaos, hugged Kwon Taekjoo and carried him to the control room. He felt as if his body was on fire and suddenly cold water had been poured on him. He was drenched in sweat and his mind was full of flashing lights. He didn't understand why Kwon Taekjoo was in such a state, but his only concern was to save him. He hugged him tightly, afraid of losing him again.

“What happened?”

Upon arriving at the villa, Olga greeted them with a mix of surprise and concern. She couldn’t help but wonder why the two had returned so soon and what might have happened during their time away. Her gaze lingered, filled with unspoken questions.

Zhenya walked around the car without offering any explanation, opened the back door, and carefully lifted Kwon Taekjoo from the seat. Taekjoo’s limbs hung limp, and he seemed unconscious. His face was pale, almost ashen.

"Taekjoo? What happened? What went on at the yacht?"

Olga asked urgently, following closely behind. But Zhenya didn’t respond. He ignored her questions entirely and carried Taekjoo straight to the bedroom. Olga hurried after him, worry written all over her face.

Taekjoo was gently laid on the bed, his body lifeless and his expression vacant. His forehead was burning hot, while his entire body was drenched in a cold sweat. He was wearing nothing but a robe, and beneath it, faint red marks could be glimpsed on his exposed skin. Olga frowned deeply, glaring at her brother.

"What’s wrong with him? Don’t tell me you did something to him! Did you hurt him? Force him into something?"

Zhenya said nothing, his eyes fixed on Taekjoo. His face showed a rare expression of shock, as if he himself couldn’t process what had happened. Olga couldn’t make sense of the situation, but the fact that Zhenya had been the last person with Taekjoo made her assume he was at fault.

"The doctor warned us! He said not to trigger any memories that could bring back his PTSD! Is it really so hard for you to act like a considerate partner for once? You’re impossible!"

Her accusations continued, but Zhenya suddenly grabbed Olga’s arm. Ignoring her protests, he dragged her out of the room and pushed her into the hallway. Caught off guard, Olga stumbled and fell to the floor.

"You—!"

"Miss Olga!"

Yoon Jongwoo, who had just returned from his errands, rushed over to help Olga up. Confused by the scene, he glanced at Zhenya and then noticed Taekjoo lying on the bed. His eyes widened in shock.

"Sunbae!"

Taekjoo didn't respond. Even from a distance, it was clear his condition was far from normal. What could have happened on the yacht? Had there been some sort of altercation between him and Zhenya? Jongwoo's mind raced with worry as he took in Zhenya's cold, ghostly expression. It only fueled his worst fears.

"What's going on, M. Yevgeny? What's wrong with Sunbae?"

Yoon Jongwoo approached Zhenya, demanding answers, but Zhenya abruptly shoved him in the chest. The sheer force of the push sent Jongwoo tumbling to the ground, landing hard on his backside.

"...Shut up. Keep yapping, and I'll kill you."

Zhenya growled, his eyes cold and lifeless as he glared at the two. Without another word, he shut the door, locking it securely from the inside.

Jongwoo and Olga exchanged stunned glances. When Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya had disembarked from the yacht, their atmosphere hadn't seemed particularly tense. Now, confusion swirled—what could possibly have happened in that short amount of time?

The two sat across from each other with grim expressions. Three hours had passed since Zhenya and Taekjoo had returned, yet the locked door showed no sign of opening.

It didn't seem like there had been a physical fight between the two. From the brief glimpse they'd had of Taekjoo's body, they had only noticed marks that hinted at intimacy—there were no bruises or signs of strangulation. The possibility that Taekjoo had attempted a desperate escape in the middle of the ocean also seemed unlikely.

Olga silently observed Jongwoo, who sat pale and fidgety. As soon as they had arrived back at the villa, Jongwoo had excused himself, claiming he needed to visit the hospital due to a sudden stomachache. She had initially assumed it was just an excuse to give them space, but now it seemed there had been another reason.

"Jongwoo."

"Y-Yes?"

"Where did you go?"

"I… I told you, to the hospital—"

"Don't lie. I know it was an excuse. Where were you really?"

“Ah… well…”

Jongwoo glanced around nervously, clearly flustered. His fingers fidgeted with the skin on the back of his hand, as if trying to distract himself. Watching him closely, Olga eventually sighed and softened her tone.

"I won't say anything to *him*.”

Yoon JongWoo looked into her eyes, as if seeking confirmation of her honesty.

"Don't you trust me?"

"I do! It's just… Sunbae told me to keep things quiet."

"If it's for Taekjoo, I'll help. Even if it means running away from here."

Olga declared confidently. After a moment of hesitation, Jongwoo let out a weary sigh, his shoulders slumping. Finally, he began to speak.

"I went to report to headquarters. Sunbae was worried that if he continued to remain out of contact, it could cause problems later on. If we're planning to return to Korea at some point, we might need their support."

"And? What did they say?"

"...I haven’t received a reply yet. With the internet speed here, accessing the main system is nearly impossible. Going directly to the embassy would take at least ten hours, given how far Athens is. I managed to send an email to the director, but honestly… I doubt headquarters will act decisively. It’s hard to say this is a case of abduction or unlawful detention. And even if it were, protocol prioritizes self-rescue. Unless Sunbae was traveling with a VIP or holding classified items, this wouldn’t be a priority for them."

Olga nodded slowly, her expression growing pensive.

"So, Taekjoo’s planning to leave again.”

"Right now, Sunbae’s last memories are from four years ago, back when he was in Korea. I think he wants to return to a familiar place to regain his bearings and recover his memories little by little. He also seems eager to tie up unfinished business from back then."

"It won’t be easy. Escaping from this place without that man noticing? Impossible."

"I know."

Jongwoo admitted, lowering his head in resignation. Realistically, slipping out of Zhenya’s grasp without violence—or without anyone getting hurt—seemed out of the question, especially given their lack of support from headquarters.

If Zhenya found out about Kwon Taekjoo's plans, there was no doubt he would be furious. After finally reuniting with him, the idea of Taekjoo leaving again would be incomprehensible to him.

As the two sat in silent contemplation, Jongwoo hesitated before finally speaking again.

"Actually… there's something else that's been worrying me more than escaping."

"Something else?"

"Sunbae keeps asking about his former superior, the department chief."

"His old superior? Why?"

"I don't know how much you know about it, Miss Olga, but Sunbae's mission in Russia was essentially a trap. The higher-ups sent him into a deadly situation to cover up their corruption. His direct superior, the department chief, was deeply involved in it. I think it must've been a huge shock for Sunbae. He never showed it openly, but he looked up to the chief—like a father or an older brother." Principio del formulario

It was hard to imagine the depth of betrayal Taekjoo must have felt, knowing that his trusted superior had not only been corrupt but had also driven him into a deadly situation. Though Taekjoo never showed his pain openly, the scars that people carry deep inside are always more profound than the ones that can be seen on the surface.

Ordinarily, it was inevitable that Taekjoo would eventually recall those memories and be hurt all over again. On top of that, the mental and physical suffering he had endured through the process of being abandoned by his superior, intertwined with Zhenya, would resurface. The thought of reclaiming those memories now didn't seem as simple or pleasant as it might have once seemed.

"Anyway, when Sunbae recalls those times, it's like reliving the betrayal and pain he went through."

Having been thrown into a foreign world, facing multiple life-threatening situations, and barely surviving to return home only to be branded a criminal—such experiences alone would have been enough to leave deep scars. And if the one behind all that had been a superior he trusted and relied on, the sense of disillusionment would be impossible to avoid.

Despite all of that, Taekjoo hadn't quit and had returned to his position. Jongwoo, reflecting on this, speculated that it was tied to his sense of duty and belief in his own purpose.

"I think Sunbae wanted to convince himself that he wasn't wrong. He wanted to believe that all the work he did, even when it sometimes hurt others, was for the greater good—*for the country*, not just a few selfish interests. He needed to believe that, so he wouldn't burn out. And so that everything he had done so far wouldn't feel meaningless or wrong." Final del formulario

For Taekjoo, it had been a path where he had put aside his mother's worries and sacrificed his own happiness, dedicating himself entirely to the cause. His sense of pride in the ultimate devotion to his country and its people had been a major driving force in his life. But how devastating would it be to discover that everything he had poured himself into had been used to serve someone else's selfish desires?

Now, with the very core of Taekjoo's beliefs shaken, the aftermath of those memories resurfacing might be even more intense than the events that occurred at the time. Jongwoo's anxiety and concern were understandable. Olga's worries about the relationship between Taekjoo and Zhenya stemmed from similar fears.

"I wish we could just erase all the bad memories forever, but for now, we have to endure it. It would be nice if there were someone who could emotionally support Taekjoo. Maybe his mother?"

"His mother isn't someone he turns to for support. She's more of someone he feels the need to protect."

When the stress or mental anguish becomes too much, it's often better to release it rather than bottle it up. For that, a person to lean on is necessary—usually family, friends, or a lover. But for Taekjoo, the only one he had to worry about was his mother. His friendships had mostly faded since joining the NIS, and his lover, Zhenya, was hardly someone who could empathize with the pain he was suffering. In fact, she was often the one provoking and pushing him, so it was only by chance that things didn't escalate further.

Olga sighed deeply.

"At the very least, let's bring a doctor in tomorrow for a consultation. I'll have a word with that person."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it. And about you trying to contact the company—don't do it in a way that attracts attention. It's not going to benefit anyone. I'll find a way to get Taekjoo and you back to Korea safely."

Jongwoo nodded repeatedly, his mind finally at ease as if he had found a powerful ally.

"You must be tired from moving around secretly. Go take a shower and rest."

"Yes. You too, Miss Olga. Good night."

As Jongwoo was about to leave the kitchen after bowing his head, he hesitated and stopped, his gaze fixed on the shadow cast on the floor.

"...Jongwoo?"

Olga looked back at him with a puzzled expression as he stood frozen. At that moment, Zhenya, who had been leaning against the wall, slowly stepped forward and blocked his path.

The shadow of Zhenya seemed to swallow Jongwoo whole. It was unclear how long Zhenya had been there or how much he had overheard.

"Have you been conspiring like this?"

"N-No, Mr. Yevgeny... It's not like that..."

Jongwoo stammered, his chin trembling as he tried to explain himself. Zhenya swiftly grabbed his throat, his blue eyes narrowing coldly.

"Are you saying that if the past memories resurface, Taekjoo will suffer?"

He tilted his head as he asked the chilling question. Jongwoo barely held on to Zhenya's arm with both hands, struggling to keep himself upright, his body trembling as he stood on his toes, trying to keep his balance.

"...Ugh. He keeps bringing up Director Lim. He still thinks that person is his superior. Bringing up that past is like being betrayed twice. It’s going to hurt him for sure."

"So?"

"... Mr. Yevgeny, please let go of me... Please, just hear me out first."

Jongwoo gasped, his breathing becoming more difficult. He lightly tapped Zhenya's hand, but Zhenya didn’t budge. Olga, seeing this, rushed over and forcefully pushed Zhenya away.

"Let go of him!"

Zhenya easily grabbed Olga's wrist and twisted it, causing her to cry out in pain. With frustration, she kicked at Zhenya's leg and scolded him.

"Are you only thinking about yourself? Do you think we’re trying to make things worse for you? We’re just trying to help Taekjoo, to figure out how we can support him!"

“Who do you think you are?”

“And what about you? Are you really a proper lover? Taekjoo's sudden outburst, it's your fault, isn't it? Don't you see that?”

Olga’s sharp words left Zhenya momentarily speechless. His jaw tightened, and veins bulged on his smooth forehead. It was clear that, at any moment, the situation could turn deadly with just the slightest provocation. However, Olga stood her ground, not backing down.

"I explained it clearly! Some memories are better off forgotten! If you didn’t want those horrific memories to resurface, you should have handled things better."

"Oh, Olga..."

"Is it so hard to accept that Taekjoo doesn’t remember you? Taekjoo is still trying to piece things together, but you can’t even stand it for a second? And you call yourself his lover?

How long are you going to act like a child? Is it wrong to worry that the person you care about will get hurt? This isn't our problem—it's yours to deal with first!"

Zhenya's voice dropped dangerously low, his warning clear. *"If you don't want to die, you better stop playing around."*

With that, he released his grip on Jongwoo and abruptly grabbed Olga by the throat, lifting her off the ground. She struggled painfully but managed to keep her eyes open, glaring at her brother. Meanwhile, Jongwoo, who had collapsed on the floor in agony, managed to crawl toward Olga, desperately clutching Zhenya's leg.

"No, please, Mr. Yevgeny! Let her go!"

"Zhenya."

For a brief moment, it seemed like the voice calling out was Taekjoo's, but it was so faint it felt like a hallucination. Zhenya's grip on Olga's throat loosened, and she fell helplessly to the floor. Jongwoo hurried over to her, kneeling beside her. **"Miss Olga, are you okay?"**

As they were occupied with each other, Zhenya, still dazed, turned around. Taekjoo was nowhere to be seen. Had he imagined it?

"Zhenya."

The voice calling him again was unmistakable. This time, Zhenya turned swiftly and left the room, his pace quickening into a run.

He burst into the bedroom, the door slamming open. Through his blurry vision, he saw Kwon Taekjoo, who had apparently fallen under the bed. It seemed that he had tripped while rushing to see what was going on outside.

Zhenya rushed over and pulled Taekjoo into his arms. Without resistance, Taekjoo collapsed into Zhenya's embrace. Zhenya's quickened breath grazed Taekjoo's ear, sending shivers through him. He squeezed Taekjoo as though trying to crush him, repeatedly rubbing his forehead against Taekjoo's neck. With a feeble hand, Taekjoo weakly patted the back of Zhenya's head.

"Can't you stop fighting like kids? You're keeping me awake. Let's just go somewhere quiet."

"Taekjoo..."

"Hmm? Where should we go?"

Taekjoo's voice was soft, barely a whisper. The sedatives he had taken to calm his seizures seemed to have dulled his senses, making his mind not quite there. Soon, his hand that had been stroking Zhenya's head slipped, and Zhenya, sensing this, grabbed his hand tightly and nodded repeatedly.

Having fought so hard to get Taekjoo back, Zhenya wanted to claim him fully. He longed to be the one Taekjoo looked to, thought of, and remembered—his one and only. He didn't want

to share a single moment of him with anyone else. His dark blue eyes glistened with blind, obsessive devotion.

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Chapter End Notes

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Blackout

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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‘What is this? Where am I?’

He looked around, disoriented. Kwon Taekjoo was standing in a square space, unsure of where he was or how he had gotten there. Just as he was about to take a step, the air suddenly thickened and the space began to distort. At the same time, his breath stopped abruptly. Moments later, a deafening crash echoed and the ground began to crumble. All the windows shattered, and the shards flew like petals.

‘Aaaah!’

He fell before he could react, toward a ground as black as night. The floating glass shards cut his skin as they passed by. Debris rained down mercilessly from above, hitting his body without pause. His helpless body slammed violently into the ground. It seemed like he could have died right then and there, and it wouldn’t have been a surprise.

Soon, the sound of sirens filled the air as rescue teams, firefighters, and ambulances lined up. Onlookers gathered, and the injured were carried away on stretchers. Amidst all of this, Kwon Taekjoo struggled to get up. A sharp ringing buzzed in his ears. He shook his head, trying to regain his senses. His limbs felt limp, as if all his bones had been shattered.

At that moment, the sound of acceleration came from behind him. He turned sharply and saw a car speeding toward him from the darkness, its high beams blinding him. It seemed intent on running over anything in its path. The glaring lights made it impossible to see the driver.

He struggled to get up and ran in a panic. He didn’t know who was chasing him, why they were chasing him, or where he should go, but he ran without stopping. He sprinted down a

narrow alley, his shoulders brushing against the walls on either side. The car continued to follow him, sometimes appearing in front of him, sometimes behind him.

Finally, at the end of the narrow alley, an open plaza appeared. Beyond it, a river flowed powerfully. Clenching his teeth, he ran toward it with all his might.

Just as he was about to exit the alley, a car slammed into him from the side. With a sharp impact, his body was thrown into the air. The car that had hit him crashed through the railing and fell straight into the river. In an instant, it was dragged under the dark water, and icy, foul water rushed into his body through every opening.

The mass of the car pulled everything around it to the bottom of the river with a violent current. No matter how hard he fought, it was futile, and little by little, he was pulled deeper. Just before touching the bottom, he struggled desperately, but soon his lungs filled with pain. With the last strength he had left, he flailed his arms and legs, and finally managed to surface.

‘Haah, haah... Damn...’

With each labored exhale, it felt like his organs were going to burst out of him. He was on his hands and knees, gasping for air. The pain in his lungs felt like they were being torn apart.

Slowly, he got to his feet, cautiously looking around. Somehow, in just a few minutes, darkness had fallen. The sound of sirens had completely disappeared, and all he could hear now was the distant sound of a passing train.

Following the sound and turning his head, he saw that the riverbank had disappeared, replaced by train tracks. A train, following those tracks, came to a stop right in front of Kwon Taekjoo. A warm gust of air poured out from the train, whose final destination was unknown. The bright lights and cozy seats visible through the windows seemed to invite him to board.

Without thinking much, he stepped onto the train. The doors closed and the train began moving toward somewhere. Through the fogged-up windows, he saw a dense birch forest and a vast, empty field passing by.

Stumbling through the narrow aisle, he passed the dining car where dishes clinked, then the luxury compartments, first class, second class, and third class, until he finally reached the conductor’s cabin. He knocked on the door. His body was moving on its own, without him controlling it. There was no response from inside. Perhaps the conductor was checking the carriages? He hadn’t seen anyone who might have looked like the conductor while walking through the train.

Just then, a dark shadow moved across the door. Thinking it might be the conductor returning, he turned his head without hesitation. In that instant, something appeared in his field of vision, and he felt a strong blow to his head. His vision began to spin, and he fell heavily to the floor. His upside-down field of vision slowly began to fill with a dark red.

‘Ahh!’

He suddenly opened his eyes, his breath caught in his throat, and he coughed to regain air. His entire body was tense, trembling. Had it been a nightmare? Somehow, the scenes didn't seem to make sense when connected together. During the dream, he hadn't realized how strange and illogical they were.

Instinctively, he placed a hand on the back of his head, where he had been struck in the dream. As expected, there was no pain. He exhaled deeply and looked out the window. The birch forest he had seen in the dream passed by quickly, followed by a vast stretch of snow that seemed endless.

Where was he? And what was he traveling in this time?

'Did you wake up?'

Just as he was starting to wonder what was going on, a familiar yet unknown voice spoke to him. Startled, he looked to his side. It was Zhenya at the wheel, looking at him with an indifferent expression. What? It had been Zhenya the whole time! Relief filled his chest.

But then, how had he ended up in his car? He was sure he had just been in Greece a moment ago. He looked out the window and saw a barren, endless landscape with no signs of life. This was definitely not Greece.

'...I had a strange dream…'

'Yeah, you had a nice nap.'

'If you saw me squirming, you could have woken me up, right?'

'You seemed to be enjoying yourself, so I left you alone.'

Zhenya said with a twisted, malicious smile. Did he really think that people only moaned in their sleep when they had erotic dreams? It seemed like he had never had a nightmare in his life.

'What the hell is wrong with you?'

Taekjoo clicked his tongue and turned his gaze back to the window. In the meantime, the car had entered a dense forest.

'Where are we?'

Zhenya didn't answer. He just kept driving aggressively until he suddenly stopped on a steep slope. Taekjoo pressed his forehead against the window, scanning the surroundings. There wasn't a single cabin or sign of civilization in sight.

What the hell was going on? He looked at Zhenya with a confused expression.

'Get out.'

Without any explanation, Zhenya got out of the car first. The cold wind rushed in through the door he had left open. The chill was so intense that his teeth were chattering. Only then did he realize he was wearing a very thin shirt.

He got out of the car, following Zhenya, shivering from the cold. Meanwhile, Zhenya took something out of the trunk. He watched in silence as Zhenya put on a long fur coat that reached his ankles. He then closed the trunk immediately. Was that all he had brought? It couldn't be; it was incredibly inconsiderate for Zhenya to wear it all by himself. That wasn't even something a couple would do.

'What's wrong with you, you damn selfish bastard? Is it enough for you to be warm?'

He silently complained, feeling hurt. But Zhenya just flicked the edges of his fur coat and walked off in long strides. If he lost him in this unknown place, he would feel completely lost. Irritated, he called out for him to wait as he hurried after him. The snow reached his knees, making every step difficult. No matter how fast he tried to move, he couldn't catch up. The distance between them kept increasing.

'Wait a second! Ah!'

He hadn't gone very far when he tripped and fell down. It was like being stuck in a swamp, unable to move. With great effort, he managed to free himself and tried to walk again, but Zhenya was no longer in sight.

'What's going on? Don't play around, this isn't fun.'

He raised his voice seriously. Only his shout echoed in the air, with no response from Zhenya. He held his breath and tried to follow his trail, but he couldn't find anything.

He hurriedly got up and ran in the direction Zhenya had disappeared. When he reached the edge of a cliff, he felt a strong wind push him from behind. He looked down. An endless abyss stretched out before him.

'...Zhenya?'

Had he gone down there? Or had he fallen? If so, how could he rescue him? The questions and confusion flooded his mind in an instant.

Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain at the back of his head. Instinctively, he turned around. A black silhouette passed quickly across his vision, and a heavy club struck his head. Unable to scream, he fell to his knees. The attacker kicked his shoulder, throwing him off the cliff.

As he fell down the precipice, he didn't take his eyes off the black silhouette. The sunlight filtering through the trees briefly illuminated the attacker's face. It was Zhenya.

"……!"

Suddenly, Taekjoo's vision cleared. His heart pounded violently, and his labored breathing echoed in his ears. His body was as stiff as stone, trembling, unable to move even a finger.

Every cell in his body was tense, a strange buzzing sensation coursing through him.

Desperately, he tried to inhale deeply, attempting to breathe normally. He couldn't take in as much air as he wanted. It felt as if a bell was ringing repeatedly in his head. Even the slightest movement of his eyes sent waves of dizziness. His pulse throbbed so violently it felt as though it could break through his skin.

"Ugh, ugh..."

As he writhed in pain, a large hand reached out from the side. When that hand covered his eyes, he felt an unexpected calm. His eyelids, which had been wide open and trembling, gently closed.

"Taekjoo, breathe."

A low voice whispered in his ear. It was Zhenya. Following his guidance, Taekjoo slowly exhaled the air that had been building in his lungs.

"Ha…"

"Well done. Once more."

"Hoo…"

The heart that had been racing finally calmed as if by magic. The pressure in his ears eased and cleared, and the trembling in his body also subsided.

Zhenya slowly removed his hand. In Taekjoo's now calm vision, an unfamiliar ceiling appeared. This place definitely didn't seem like the villa in Greece. He tried to turn his head toward Zhenya, but a groan escaped him as he felt the dampness. He had sweated so much that the sheets were soaked.

He turned with difficulty to look at Zhenya. Zhenya was sitting in a chair beside the bed. Taekjoo had no idea how long he had been asleep, but he had the distinct feeling that Zhenya had been watching over him the entire time. He stared at him and moved his lips. His voice came out hoarse.

"...Zhenya."

"Yes."

When Taekjoo reached out his hand, Zhenya took it and rubbed his cheek against the back of his hand. His skin felt colder and rougher than before.

Taekjoo closed his eyes and reopened them. Throughout it all, Zhenya's gaze remained fixed on him. For some reason, Taekjoo felt a sense of relief and began speaking as though he were complaining.

"I had a strange dream. I woke up from one only to find myself in another... and I kept being chased."

Zhenya didn’t answer. He simply pressed his lips to Taekjoo’s hand and gently caressed it, as if tickling him.

“Where are we?”

At the question, Zhenya looked at him intently. Although his expression didn’t change much, his eyes seemed strangely disappointed. The response came with a slight delay.

“Ajinoki.”

“Ajinoki?”

Taekjoo asked just to be sure, but the name of the place was still unfamiliar. It didn’t seem like a well-known city like Seoul or Moscow, places he should have known.

“Taekjoo, this is where you and I used to live.”

With the additional explanation, Taekjoo understood. Although the answer didn’t fully satisfy his curiosity, it sounded somewhat romantic. *“So, it’s not Greece, right? Is it Russia?”*

“Administratively, yes. But no one can enter without my permission.”

Did that mean the whole area was Zhenya’s property? It didn’t surprise Taekjoo. But what truly intrigued him was something else.

“How did we get here? I didn’t have a passport or anything, and I was unconscious the entire time.”

“It was nothing.”

Zhenya shrugged indifferently. Considering his power and wealth, it didn’t seem impossible. On the other hand, thinking about how easily they had arrived in Russia made Taekjoo recall the difficulties they had faced crossing the Iranian border recently, which left him with a strange feeling of emptiness.

“It seems my past self had an incredible lover.”

"Of course."

Even at Taekjoo's sarcastic remark, Zhenya lifted his chin with pride. Did he lack a bit of social skills?

"My back hurts. Help me sit up."

Taekjoo shook the hand Zhenya was holding. Without a word, Zhenya tugged on his hand and helped him sit up, placing a pillow behind his back. Taekjoo rested against it with a groan of relief.

He reflected on the recent events. The thing he remembered most clearly was being alone on the yacht with Zhenya. After sending Olga and Yoon Jongwoon back, they had shared several

conversations that had created an awkward atmosphere between them. It wasn't something he had planned. He had simply gone with the flow of the moment.

It had been a long time since he'd been intimate with anyone, and he felt light, almost curious to see if he could truly reach that point with Zhenya. Or maybe it was all just a ridiculous excuse to justify his desire to be with him.

But before he could act on it, a sudden memory struck. He vividly recalled the time he was interrogated in an Iranian prison—asked who he was, where he came from, and why he was there. As an undercover agent, he was accustomed to intense interrogations and torture, and had some immunity to it. But he'd never been sexually abused like that. At that moment, his sole focus had been on escaping, leaving no time to face his emotions. But the emotional damage was clearly greater than he had realized.

The moment Zhenya touched him in an intimate way, the memories of the torture flooded back. He could no longer clearly see the person in front of him, and a feeling of disgust overwhelmed him. He could barely breathe, and he thought he was hyperventilating. As he writhed in pain, Zhenya held him tightly, almost like he was trying to bind him. Taekjoo remembered resisting him fiercely for a long while, pushing him away.

He regained some semblance of calm just after Zhenya kissed him suddenly. Zhenya bit his lips and tongue, then pushed a sedative into his mouth as Taekjoo tried to escape. Zhenya then stroked his head and soothed him, holding him still until he completely stopped resisting.

"Taekjoo, calm down. No one can hurt you now. I won't let anyone touch you."

When Taekjoo no longer had the strength to resist and his eyelids started to close, Zhenya's voice rang in his ears. Soon after, he lost consciousness. It seemed that Zhenya had been just as shaken by the unexpected turn of events. Taekjoo scratched his ear and apologized.

"I'm sorry about what happened on the yacht. I suddenly remembered something bad."

"...Something bad?"

Zhenya tilted his head, curious. Although they were lovers, Taekjoo didn't feel the need to share everything. It would only make Zhenya more worried. But if he minimized it, it would seem like he had rejected him for an insignificant reason and might hurt his feelings. After thinking it over, he decided to explain indirectly.

"It's obvious, isn't it? You know how they treat agents who are captured during espionage operations. I don't remember much, but they interrogated me for days about who I was, where I came from, and what my mission was."

He spoke as lightly as possible, as though it were no big deal. Zhenya, being part of the FSB, would likely understand the situation without needing many details. As agents, they accepted those kinds of risks.

He was about to say that it was all in the past and they should forget about it, but Zhenya gave off a cold vibe. His eyes, which had been warm just moments before, suddenly turned sharp.

"Who touched you, Taekjoo?"

"Relax, damn it. If I were that kind of person, I'd have already killed him."

"What exactly happened?"

"I don't think it's something you'd want to hear. I don't want to remember it either."

"..."

"Anyway, I might have another attack, and I don't think I'm in great shape, so let's take it slow from now on. Got it?"

Taekjoo spoke to Zhenya like he was a child. After all, Zhenya was much younger than him, and from what he had observed, he responded better when treated gently. As expected, after a long silence, Zhenya exhaled deeply and agreed. "Alright." He seemed just as confused by the situation.

Taekjoo listened intently to the sounds outside the bedroom. Zhenya noticed his attention and also turned his head.

"What happened with Jongwoon and Olga? It sounded like you were arguing."

When Taekjoo had regained consciousness on the yacht, he had already been in the bedroom. He hadn't seen Zhenya, Jongwoon, or Olga. He only heard their voices outside. He couldn't make out exactly what they were saying, but from the tension in the air, he knew they were having an intense argument. He felt he should intervene before things got out of hand.

"You left them there? Did you tell them to come here?"

"How would I know?"

"You didn't hurt them, did you?"

Zhenya looked away with a huff. He didn't like Taekjoo worrying about others in the middle of everything, but it seemed he hadn't done anything Taekjoo feared.

"Alright, then."

Taekjoo threw off the blankets and got up. Limping on his injured leg, he made his way to the window. Just like in the dream, a vast landscape stretched out beyond the window. In the distance, the blue sea could be seen, with hills that could almost be considered mountains on one side. The dense birch trees around caught his attention. It was an incredibly peaceful and tranquil view. However, he was surprised not to see any other buildings. Not even power lines were in sight.

"Are you saying that you and I... live here?"

"Yes. Taekjoo, you always came here after finishing your work. There were no interruptions or obligations."

He nodded, accepting the explanation. After exhausting jobs, he would often stay home for days to recover his energy. Would it be different now that he had a lover? Here, it seemed like he could relax completely. He could sleep as much as he wanted, eat his favorite meals, and when boredom struck, enjoy fishing or hunting. He could easily imagine spending days here with Zhenya.

"But when you say there are no interruptions..."

"It's my island. A space just for me."

Did that mean it was a deserted island? Taekjoo let out an incredulous laugh. Zhenya came up behind him and covered him with a thick blanket. The soft fabric felt like the fur coat he had seen in his dream. Zhenya hugged him and kissed the back of his head. Taekjoo felt uncomfortable and withdrawn. Then, Zhenya leaned in closer and rubbed his face against his hair. The affectionate gesture sent a tingle to Taekjoo's cheeks, and the hairs in his ears stood on end.

"You said you would come for me as soon as you were done with the matter at hands. You told me you'd be back safe and sound, so you asked me to do nothing and wait here peacefully."

"So, you heard the news that I was dead?"

Zhenya nodded in place of answering. The sharp tip of his nose brushed lightly against Taekjoo's scalp.

"You're tickling me, you bastard."

Taekjoo turned to face him. Zhenya lifted him effortlessly and sat him on the windowsill. They stared at each other for a while. For a moment, time seemed to stop. It was Taekjoo who broke the strange silence. He smiled and patted Zhenya on the cheek.

"I caused all that trouble and then suddenly you thought I was dead. When you finally figured out I was still alive and went to find me, you were met with suspicion, asking who you were. It must have been confusing for you."

"You seemed to be mocking me."

Zhenya smiled faintly, showing a bit of weariness. When Taekjoo gently caressed his chin, Zhenya opened his eyes wide with a provocative look. To avoid making things awkward, Taekjoo pinched Zhenya's cheek. The unexpected reaction from Zhenya, with his wide-eyed expression, was surprisingly cute, causing Taekjoo to laugh.

"Have you slept at all lately? You have dark circles under your eyes."

"Who are you worrying about, Taekjoo?"

"I haven't seen you sleep or eat. Are you human?"

"Are you underestimating me?"

"I'm not underestimating you. I'm worried, idiot."

Taekjoo let go of Zhenya's cheek after giving it a little shake. He didn't have the strength to keep holding it. Maybe it was the effect of the sedative or the fact that he had been moved while asleep, but a deep fatigue suddenly overtook him.

"You said we wouldn't be disturbed here, right?"

"Yes."

"Then let's sleep a little more. I'm so tired."

"As long as you want."

Zhenya lifted Taekjoo with the blanket and returned to the bed. Taekjoo buried his head in the pillow and gently pulled at Zhenya's arm. Zhenya hugged him firmly from behind, intertwining his legs with Taekjoo's injured one to hold it steady. Zhenya's body, which completely enveloped Taekjoo, felt as comforting as the bedding. Taekjoo's eyelids, which were about to close, finally did. Zhenya buried his head in the back of Taekjoo's neck and slowly closed his eyes. It was the perfect rest they hadn't had in a long time. For a while, the house was filled with the soft sound of their breathing.

He woke up slowly. The senses returning one by one felt strangely peaceful, as if he had been in a deep, dreamless sleep for a long time. His eyes fluttered open as he tried to make sense of his surroundings. He vaguely remembered talking to Zhenya in the middle of the night. Zhenya had mentioned something about it being his island.

He turned his head as he felt the breath of another person. Zhenya, sound asleep, filled his field of vision. Zhenya was curled up in his arms, his large body fitting comfortably against his own. The arm around his waist was heavy and firm, and Zhenya's face, completely relaxed, was simply beautiful. His bangs fell across his eyes, making him look younger than he actually was. Every time he breathed, his long, thick eyelashes fluttered slightly. His skin, which had once seemed a bit rough, now glowed with a soft sheen.

Can I touch him? Before he could decide, his fingers had already brushed against Zhenya's cheek. In that moment, Zhenya's eyelids opened as if it was all an illusion. In his clear blue eyes, Taekjoo's dazed face was reflected perfectly.

"...Taekjoo?"

"Yeah, did you sleep well?"

When he greeted him awkwardly, Zhenya's lips curved into a long smile. Even his eyes seemed to slightly squint with the warmth of it. He looked incredibly charming.

"Am I that beautiful?"

"Are you crazy? Don't say nonsense so early in the morning."

"It seems like you're shy by nature. Do whatever you want."

"What… what…?"

Zhenya blinked with feigned innocence. The sunlight filtering through the window made his hair and eyelashes shine exquisitely. His eyes seemed even more transparent, as if there was something almost ethereal about him. How could a part of the human body emit such a mysterious light?

Zhenya looked at Taekjoo absentmindedly and urged him.

"Don't just stare. If you want to touch, go ahead, Zainka."

"Who said that? Let go of me. I need to go to the bathroom."

Taekjoo gently tapped the arm Zhenya had around his waist. Zhenya didn't release him immediately but buried his head in Taekjoo's chest instead.

"I'm in a hurry."

When Taekjoo complained irritably, Zhenya laughed and pulled away. Then, he tried to lift Taekjoo to carry him, but Taekjoo pushed him away.

"It's fine. Now that I'm in rehab, I should be moving on my own."

When he rejected the help, Zhenya's expression became stubborn, as if he were playing with a doll. Now that the doll wanted to move by itself, he felt like his toy had been taken away. Still, Taekjoo got out of bed and made his way outside. Zhenya followed him like a father trailing behind a child who had just learned how to walk.

As they left the bedroom, Taekjoo noticed a large door right next to it. He had a feeling it led to the bathroom.

"Is it here?"

"Yes."

"Wait here."

"Now you're getting shy?"

"Nothing wrong with a little shyness."

Taekjoo shut the door in front of Zhenya, who was trying to enter. Zhenya didn't push against the door but didn't move away either.

Taekjoo turned slowly. As expected, the bathroom was excessively spacious. He sighed.

"It feels like it'll take me half a day to get to the bathroom."

He shook his head and walked towards the toilet, casually glancing around. The first thing that caught his eye was the window on the opposite wall. Through it, the blue sky was clearly visible. What was odd, however, was that the narrow window was blocked by bars. If they were in a densely populated area, he might understand it, but on a deserted island, there was no real reason to worry about thieves. It also seemed unlikely that large animals could slip through a window that high. Could it be that this building was once a prison before becoming a mansion? Or perhaps this was just Zhenya's taste?

He knocked on the wall beneath the window. It made a heavy sound, as if he were tapping on a load-bearing wall. He couldn't make sense of the building's structure.

After using the toilet and washing his hands, Taekjoo noticed his reflection in the mirror. His face looked dry and disheveled. His hair was flattened and messy. He couldn't stand how he looked, so he decided to take a shower.

He stepped into the shower and turned on the water. Despite his worry that only cold water would come out, the warm water felt pleasant against his skin. He washed his face vigorously, feeling refreshed. When he reached for the shower gel, he noticed a familiar scent. Looking closer, he realized it was the same product he had used before. It seemed that it wasn't a lie that he used to spend time here with Zhenya before losing his memory.

At some point, he had fallen for someone who had once been his enemy. Although he preferred calm and uneventful relationships, his tastes had changed without him realizing. Even as fragments of his past resurfaced, the one question that remained constant in his mind was about Zhenya. That's why he kept watching him with such curiosity.

After his shower, he opened a nearby cabinet. He grabbed a towel and dried off his hair and body. While searching further, he found a disposable razor. Although he usually preferred an electric shaver, due to his nomadic lifestyle, disposable razors were more convenient for Taekjoo.

He took out the razor, shaved, and brushed his teeth. As he put the toothbrush down, he noticed another one and felt a strange discomfort. It almost seemed like he actually lived here.

He scratched his head and looked at his reflection in the mirror. For some reason, his face in the mirror looked especially odd. Although he had cleaned himself up, he looked like a vagabond who hadn't showered in days. His eyes were filled with desperation and rage. Was he seeing things? Just as he was about to rub his eyes, his head began to spin. His vision suddenly turned yellow.

"Ugh…"

It felt as though his brain was being squeezed. The dizziness that shook his entire body made it hard to stay standing. A constant headache, familiar yet never fully tolerable, assaulted him relentlessly.

He squeezed his eyes shut. Then, a scene began to play in his mind. He saw someone pulling towels from the sink. The person ripped the towels with a razor blade and tied them together to form an improvised rope. Then, he attached a hook to the end of the rope and threw it toward the high window. The hook hit the bars and fell limply. The man, constantly looking back toward the door as if he were being chased, continued throwing the hook again and again. After several failed attempts, the hook finally went over the bars. Pulling on the rope, the hook turned and caught firmly on the bars.

The man started climbing the high wall with the makeshift rope. Despite slipping several times, he kept climbing until he reached the bars. Jumping, he managed to grab hold of the bars. Hanging from them, the man tried to pry the window frame open with his body.

However, the thick bars didn't budge at all. Instead, the man slipped and fell to the ground, landing hard on his backside. Maybe he thought that was the end. But then, a man with eyes burning with fury ripped the drain pipe from the sink. He used the pipe to ruthlessly smash the wall and, with his bare hands, pried off the broken tiles in a desperate attempt. Despite his efforts, beyond the torn wall, a polished stone surface appeared. The pipe fell from his exhausted hands.

"…"

Taekjoo looked at his hands. He could almost feel the vibration of hitting the wall with the drain pipe echoing through his body. The man desperately trying to escape from this strange bathroom was clearly his past self. What had happened in this place?

Zhenya had described this place as a paradise for the two of them. He said that while they were here, they confirmed their feelings for each other, and that after living in Korea, they often came here on vacation once their work was finished. But why, in his newly recovered memories, had he been so desperate to escape from this place?

"...Taekjoo?"

Suddenly, Zhenya's voice came from outside. Taekjoo jumped, realizing Zhenya must have sensed something was wrong. When he didn't respond, Zhenya began banging on the door.

"Taekjoo!"

Finally, Zhenya burst into the room. He froze when he saw Taekjoo sitting on the floor, his face pale. He rushed over to him and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, I just suddenly felt dizzy."

Zhenya frantically examined Taekjoo's body, searching for any signs of injury. He then glanced around the bathroom, trying to understand what had happened.

"Did any memories come back?"

Zhenya looked into his eyes again and asked. Although it was just a feeling, his tone seemed slightly tense. He seemed worried that Taekjoo might have recalled something from the past. Zhenya's gaze shifted between Taekjoo's eyes, as if trying to discern the truth.

If Taekjoo told him the truth, Zhenya might uncover why his past self had tried to escape this place. But Taekjoo shook his head.

"No. It was just dizziness. I think I stayed in the shower too long."

The discrepancy between the story Zhenya had told him and the memories that had suddenly surfaced was too great. He didn't know which was closer to the truth. Although he should trust Zhenya, his lover, he wanted to wait a little longer for his memories to return. He still didn't feel confident that Zhenya wouldn't taint his memories.

"Let me help you get up."

"Okay."

Without a word, Taekjoo accepted Zhenya's help. Zhenya sat him down in a corner of the bathroom and personally helped him put on his underwear. As his hands gently moved up the sides of his legs, Taekjoo's breath caught suddenly. His body tensed up without him even realizing it.

Zhenya pulled up the underwear effortlessly, then put a t-shirt on him in a rushed manner. The suddenness of it made the tension from before vanish instantly. The shirt brushed against his neck, and his face burned so intensely he couldn't say a word.

"It hurts, idiot! You say you're taking care of me, but you're so rough."

"You're angry again, in such a weird way."

"What did you say?"

"It's time to eat."

Zhenya lifted Taekjoo without asking. As he was being dragged along, Taekjoo suddenly looked back. Zhenya treated him with devotion, like any lover would, and his mansion was full of traces of Taekjoo. Even the underwear he was wearing fit perfectly, and the t-shirt he had just put on was the same kind he wore during his military service. So why? An inexplicable feeling of déjà vu made his heart beat faster than usual.

"Nobody else lives here, right? No one's coming and going?"

He murmured, staring aimlessly out the window. He had been watching for a while, but there were no signs of people—just a few birds flapping their wings and flying by.

"I told you, no one can enter without my permission."

Zhenya set a cup of coffee in front of Taekjoo. The aroma was delightful. He blew lightly on the hot coffee to cool it down and took a sip. The perfect warmth spread from his mouth throughout his body. The taste and scent were exactly to his liking. Was this something couples naturally come to know about each other?

"It's delicious."

Zhenya smiled as if it were obvious and turned to the kitchen. He opened all the cabinets to show Taekjoo.

"What do you want to eat?"

The cabinet was filled with Korean instant foods. There were all sorts, from various types of ramen to military rations and ready-to-heat meals. It was a mystery where he had gotten all of it.

"What's all this?"

"Someone complained so much about Russian food that they couldn't stand it. They said it upset their stomach and that they couldn't stay here for another day, that they wanted to go back to Korea right away."

Although he didn't remember it, there was no excuse. He had grown up eating only the food his mother prepared, so if he didn't eat Korean food, his stomach would quickly feel heavy. When abroad, he begrudgingly ate local food, but he felt his energy draining faster than normal. If he was spending private time with his lover, he wouldn't have tolerated eating something he didn't like.

Still, an adult complaining about food to their young lover? That didn't seem very mature. Although they say everyone gets childish when they're in love, it was pretty pathetic.

"Yes, what would you like, Taekjoo?"

"Let's see. The one that says 'Gamjatang,' I feel like having that."

Zhenya frowned as he looked at the instant meals. It seemed he didn't know what "Gamjatang" was.

"The one in the middle with the red packaging."

"All of them are red."

Looking at the completely red packages, he muttered, "Why is all Korean food like this?" He suddenly remembered when he cooked ramen in Greece, covering his mouth and nose. Was Korean food just for him, and he couldn't eat spicy food? Then what did he eat in Korea? His curiosity didn't stop.

"...Then, the white one second from the left."

"Didn't you want the red one?"

"I also like that white one. At least you can eat it, right?"

He got up and went over to Zhenya. Then he grabbed the *galbitang* and placed it on the counter. He smiled at Zhenya, who was looking at him with a confused expression.

"Let's eat together, now that we're here."

Though he felt a bit awkward, he intended to treat Zhenya like his previous lovers. But suddenly, Zhenya hugged him tightly. It wouldn't have been surprising if he broke a rib.

"I can't breathe."

But Zhenya didn't let go, pulling him even closer. Was he excited by the unusual display of affection? Maybe, after all the suffering, he wanted to act a little spoiled.

"Alright, alright."

He patted Zhenya's neck. Since Zhenya still couldn't calm down, he grabbed a suitable pot and poured the soup into it. Though he didn't have high expectations, there was more meat in it than he thought. The characteristic aroma of *galbitang* stimulated his senses. He quickly began salivating, and his stomach started growling.

He took four packets of instant rice from the cabinet and heated them up in the microwave. After bringing the hot rice to the table and pouring water, Zhenya was still glued to his back. How had he ended up with such a spoiled kid? He wasn't his type, as he had never liked people who were too affectionate.

"Come on, enough. It's time to eat or I'll starve."

He patted Zhenya's arm, who had his head resting on Taekjoo's shoulder. Zhenya rubbed his face against the back of Taekjoo's neck before letting go of him. Instead of sitting down immediately, he went to the refrigerator to grab something.

"Oh, kimchi too?"

Was this what it felt like to discover a diamond mine? Just having regular napa kimchi was more than he expected, but there was also radish kimchi. He opened the lid immediately and tried one. Although it was a bit fermented, it was to his taste.

It wasn't just okay, it felt familiar. It tasted like his mother's kimchi.

"...Eh, this?"

"The little woman gave it to me as a gift. She makes it with different ingredients depending on the season."

"Kimchi isn't something you give to just anyone. Looks like my mother really liked you."

He said as he poured some of the juice and kimchi into the *galbitang*, smiling. Zhenya frowned as he watched the broth quickly cloud up.

"Why do you keep turning food into trash?"

"Trash? That's an insult. People who know how to eat do it this way."

"Not even a dog would eat that."

Despite the continuous criticism, Taekjoo kept eating with pleasure, even mixing the rice with the soup and spooning it up. The spicy and sour kimchi blended perfectly with the thick broth of the *galbitang*, making his appetite open up. He felt like he could eat several bowls. He gestured to Zhenya to eat as well, pointing to his bowl of soup. Zhenya sighed lightly and took a spoonful. With his eyes lowered, he simply ate the soup in silence. He also wiped his lips, which weren't even dirty, with the napkin, pressing it. His reserved attitude was frustrating to watch.

"Take this and eat it already."

Taekjoo said, placing a piece of kimchi on Zhenya's spoon. Suddenly, he froze and tensed up. Did he not like someone using his spoon to feed him? Taekjoo looked at Zhenya, who was watching him with an uncomfortable expression.

"It tastes better when you eat it together."

Zhenya sighed softly and finally placed the piece of kimchi in his mouth. His normally slender cheeks puffed out slightly. He held the small piece of radish in his mouth, not chewing, then began to move his jaw slowly, too slowly. When he finally swallowed, he covered his mouth with his fist and gulped down slowly, his ears and neck flushing red.

"What? Are you sensitive to spice?"

Taekjoo laughed out loud as he saw Zhenya's lips quickly puff up. Zhenya looked at him with eyes misted over with tears from the water welling up in his eyes.

"Do you always find this funny?"

"I didn't know you couldn't handle spice."

Barely containing his laughter, Taekjoo offered him a glass of water. Zhenya hurriedly drank, trying to calm the burning in his mouth.

"If you can't eat it, you could just refuse it. Why accept it, like a child who doesn't want to be disliked? Have we made you eat in fear at my house?"

Tsking, Taekjoo walked over to the fridge and searched for ice. He pulled out a cube meant for cooling drinks, sat lightly on the edge of the table, and gently took Zhenya's chin in his hand. Zhenya obediently tilted his face toward him, looking up from below. Taekjoo softly rubbed the ice over Zhenya's swollen lips. The ice melted quickly against the warmth of his

skin, making his lips glisten. It almost seemed like Zhenya was kissing the ice and Taekjoo's fingers with his lips.

When Taekjoo lifted his gaze from his lips, their eyes met instantly. They exchanged a silent look for a moment. In the next instant, Zhenya broke the tension with a smile and brought the ice to his lips. At the same time, he pulled Taekjoo closer, drawing him to sit on his lap at the table.

"After all this time, seems like it's still a little spicy."

Taekjoo, gently stroking Zhenya's cheek with his damp fingers, grabbed his earlobe. He slowly leaned in, and Zhenya licked the ice softly. The cold sensation delighted his mouth. Licking the surface of the ice repeatedly, he pushed the remaining little crystals into Zhenya's mouth. Zhenya let out a soft moan as he sweetly swallowed the cold, intrusive crystals. The coldness vanished between their tongues, entangled tightly.

They separated for a moment and locked eyes. Both of their blue eyes were tinged with a deep red. Pulling back slightly, Zhenya lunged at Taekjoo, pushing him down onto the table. Taekjoo welcomed the intense attack, kissing him passionately.

After the meal, Taekjoo sat on the living room sofa and idly flipped through some dusty books. It hadn't surprised him that he hadn't seen a single book in the entire house until he found a pile of them tucked under the stairs in the storage room. What unsettled him slightly was that all of them had pink covers, adorned with hearts, lace, and roses. The titles weren't ordinary either; they all turned out to be romance novels.

Could they be Olga's? Or perhaps Zhenya had unexpectedly soft tastes like these? Taekjoo flipped through a few pages and sighed, closing the book with a sense of disinterest.

When he tossed the book aside, the face that had been hidden behind it was revealed. Taekjoo's lips, already full, were noticeably swollen. The kiss they had started during dinner had continued, uninterrupted, for so long. Taekjoo had bitten and sucked on his lips so much that he couldn't feel anything anymore, as if they'd been numbed. Zhenya had been pressed against him, rubbing his lower body against Taekjoo's, but had not gone any further than that. He had desperately clung to Taekjoo's lips and tongue, without pushing beyond that. In the end, Taekjoo was the one who had to pull away, out of breath. Zhenya had only pulled back after biting Taekjoo's cheek hard.

Taekjoo scratched the spot where Zhenya's teeth had left marks. He had told Zhenya to take it slow, but every time things got romantic, they ended up losing control.

Was it okay to keep pressing their bodies together like this? Zhenya constantly created that sensual atmosphere, and Taekjoo always ended up giving in. After all, Zhenya was his lover, and even though Taekjoo tried to rationalize it as an effort to help Zhenya recover his memories, he felt like Zhenya had no self-control at all.

Of course, Taekjoo wasn't exactly a sexually restrained person either. Depending on the situation or how attracted he felt, he had no problem with a one-night affair. However, when

it wasn't just a fleeting thing, he always made sure not to cause unnecessary harm to either party.

"Bah, never mind," he muttered to himself.

He scratched the back of his head in frustration, unsure of what was right or wrong. What if his memories never fully returned? Should he still be with Zhenya then? It would be hard to feel the same for someone he didn't have memories of. But it would also be cruel to simply tell him to forget everything.

He glanced around the room and stood up. He consciously decided to stop overthinking and find something to distract himself. Soon, a piano in the corner caught his attention. There was also a large string instrument next to it. Could playing music be one of Zhenya's hobbies? Taekjoo could picture Zhenya's long, delicate fingers pressing the keys of the piano—surely it would be a sight to see.

He sat on the bench and lifted the piano lid. He had never taken piano lessons. The only piano he had growing up was in his home as a child, and his mother used to play it every so often. His hands moved awkwardly over the keys, lacking confidence. He pressed a few random keys, and suddenly, he felt a presence behind him.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw Zhenya leaning slightly forward. Zhenya's head naturally rested on Taekjoo's shoulder, their ears brushing against each other. At the same time, Zhenya's hand slid beneath Taekjoo's, intertwining their fingers.

"You've forgotten how to play, huh? I taught you so many times."

Zhenya's voice, filled with laughter, rang out, especially loud in the otherwise quiet room. He watched Taekjoo's face closely as Zhenya pressed the keys with his own hand, placing it gently over Taekjoo's. Though Zhenya's hand was just resting on top, their finger movements produced harmonious sounds, giving the impression that they were playing together. Zhenya also slid his left hand between Taekjoo's ribs, adding his own accompaniment. A melody began to form, flowing smoothly.

After a while, Zhenya slowly withdrew his hand and gently took hold of Taekjoo's wrist. Without thinking about which keys to press or when, Taekjoo's fingers moved in sync with Zhenya's body. Like magic, the piece came together, perfectly in harmony with Zhenya's accompaniment. It was as if it were an experience and a memory written into his very body.

Had Taekjoo learned to play the piano with Zhenya here? Had they been sitting so close that they could feel each other's warmth and breath? They must have enjoyed some rather romantic moments together.

As the music finished, Taekjoo was absorbed in the resonance of the moment. He snapped back to reality when he heard Zhenya's soft laugh.

"Seems like your body remembers more than your mind. You say you've forgotten everything, but your body remembers, doesn't it? Both the piano playing and... other things."

Zhenya's expression as he mentioned "other things" was suggestive. It was said that nobles loved metaphors, and Zhenya was no exception, constantly teasing him with insinuations. The blouse he had changed into was also made of silk, with large ruffles. Did men even wear things like that? With loose sleeves that almost covered the back of his hands and the neckline that fell gently over his shoulders, it seemed as if his large body became lighter due to an optical illusion. His tousled, unkempt hair softened the overall impression.

But this time, Taekjoo had no intention of giving in easily. He bit down hard on his teeth, forcing himself to look away from Zhenya. His gaze landed on the string instrument next to the piano, and he asked, feigning interest in something that didn't truly intrigue him.

"What's that? A cello?"

"A double bass."

"Do you know how to play that too?"

"It's common to handle one or two instruments."

He spoke as if it were a given that humans ate three meals a day. If it had been taekwondo, Taekjoo would have understood, but what was the point of learning to play an instrument?

"Why? Do you want to hear it?"

"With a double bass, you can't play it alone, right? I don't know anything about concerts. I'm still amazed at how you played the piano just now…"

Zhenya smiled and moved behind the double bass. The massive instrument fit perfectly in his arms. He rested it on his shoulder and began to play the bow. A heavy, deep melody slowly resonated from within his body. His pale fingers moved fluidly and elegantly over the strings.

Taekjoo stood up and moved to a nearby sofa, hugging a large cushion and resting his head on it.

Zhenya, living up to Taekjoo's expectations, began to play the double bass seriously. The piece, majestic yet tinged with melancholy, filled the room. The air itself seemed to tighten around Taekjoo's chest.

The moonlight filtered through the ceiling windows and walls, making Zhenya's hair and skin softly shine, creating a dreamy landscape.

As the piece ended, Zhenya looked up and glanced at Taekjoo, his face curious about his reaction.

"Thanks to you, my ears are pleased. Are you really that good?"

"Of course…"

"…Though it may seem sudden, how were we?"

Was that an unexpected question? Zhenya, who had been proudly lifting his chin, now wore a confused expression.

“How were we? What do you mean?”

“Just in general. It seems like we used to fight a lot.”

“Couldn’t say we argued,” Zhenya smiled and began recounting Taekjoo’s past grievances.

“Taekjoo, you used to get angry for no reason. You’d scold me, saying that I didn’t understand what you were saying and asking how far you had to explain for me to get it. I’d say, thanks to you, my patience, which I didn’t have before, has grown.”

It was hard to believe that Kwon Taekjoo had once gotten angry with his lover, who was four years younger than him, for no apparent reason. After all, they had grown up in different cultures, so it was natural that their lifestyles and ways of thinking would differ. Listening to Zhenya, it felt as though his past self was a mess.

However, there was a hint of doubt. While Taekjoo used to get angry often, he couldn’t recall ever being irrationally temperamental. Also, when he thought about Zhenya’s behavior, he couldn’t help but think that he couldn’t have been just an innocent victim.

“...Didn’t you do anything wrong?”

“Me? Do something wrong?”

Zhenya seemed baffled, as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Then he began to criticize Taekjoo’s harsh attitudes once again.

“You’d get angry and leave, only coming back after you’d cooled down. I got used to waiting.”

Had Taekjoo really been that evasive? He felt uncomfortable. He remembered his exes complaining about always having to wait. That’s why he had never been able to maintain a relationship for more than six months. But with Zhenya, it had been three years. Perhaps Zhenya’s patience was more remarkable than he had realized, or maybe his feelings ran deeper than he had imagined.

“Despite everything, you stayed.”

“I told you. Taekjoo, I’ll follow you wherever you go.”

Taekjoo looked at Zhenya silently, and Zhenya responded calmly to the gaze. After a moment, Taekjoo nodded.

“Understood.”

Zhenya furrowed his brows and tilted his head, clearly confused about what exactly Taekjoo meant. The unexpected declarations from Taekjoo continued.

“I’ll do my best.”

“What are you saying?”

“I still don’t remember anything, but everything my mother said, what Jongwoon said, and the traces that still remain here... It all seems to confirm that you were my lover, so I’ll try to accept it, somehow.”

“Now you realize? It seems like you think you’re making some great sacrifice.”

“I don’t know how you see it, but for me, having a 'male lover' is something that requires a very significant decision in my life. First of all, it doesn’t make sense, something like that.”

“Ahhh…”

Zhenya let out a puff of air, as if he were bewildered. He still didn’t understand how they had ended up in that kind of relationship, but the fact that Taekjoo felt an uncontrollable attraction to him, even without remembering anything, didn’t seem entirely impossible. In that case, there was no choice but to make decisions he wouldn’t regret once his memories returned.

“I can’t let this important decision slip away just because I don’t remember.”

Zhenya, arms crossed, seemed eager to understand what Taekjoo was trying to say. Taekjoo, with more determination, declared:

“As long as I’m here, I’ll focus only on you.”

Since he had come this far, he wanted to face it completely. It seemed that Zhenya was pleased with this decision. The frown that had been on his face slowly relaxed. He looked almost angelic, like someone might say an angel had descended.

"Let's go."

Taekjoo opened the door first and nodded for Zhenya to follow. He was tired of being alone inside and decided to take a walk around the island. He hoped that by exploring the terrain and walking a bit, some of his lost memories might come back. Zhenya watched Taekjoo limping with an expression of disdain.

"I know you can’t sit still for a second, but you should avoid pushing yourself."

"How little you think of people. I used to walk in much worse conditions than this."

"Get moving."

Zhenya sighed and reluctantly followed, watching Taekjoo walk with surprisingly steady steps despite his injuries and recovery time. It looked as though he could run if he wanted to. In fact, if he hadn’t been so resilient, he wouldn’t have lasted even a year in the field.

"This island is bigger than it looks," Taekjoo commented as they walked through the endless prairie. From the mansion, he had thought the island was about the size of Dokdo, but now it seemed comparable to Ulleungdo. And considering that you could ski, fish, and even hunt here, it might actually be even bigger. It wasn't surprising that Zhenya thought he was crazy for wanting to take a simple walk around the island.

On the other hand, choosing to stay alone on such a vast island was difficult to understand, even for someone who enjoyed solitude.

"How long have you been here?"

"I'm not sure. I haven't been counting the days."

"Why did you buy this island?"

"I needed a quiet place. Somewhere no one would bother me."

Taekjoo nodded. It wasn't so much that he understood Zhenya, but more that he had anticipated a response like that.

"Did you date anyone here before me? I imagine there must have been people who felt uncomfortable. Well, no, most probably didn't complain, right?"

"No one. I've never brought anyone here."

Zhenya replied firmly. He glanced at Taekjoo and added,

"No one else, except you."

"...Ah, I see."

Taekjoo didn't think Zhenya was just saying that for the sake of it. He couldn't imagine Zhenya dating anyone else. Of course, it wasn't just Taekjoo who could be drawn to Zhenya's appearance. But his destructive nature and unusual way of thinking didn't seem to fit the idea of a romantic relationship.

However, when it came to sex, Zhenya appeared quite open. He seemed experienced in handling his lover, with notable skills both in touch and in creating the right atmosphere. Even if he hadn't been in a romantic relationship, had he been involved in everything else? His attractive face contrasted with his uninhibited behavior.

"What's wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"That expression."

"I don't know. I was wondering whether I should feel happy for being your only date or guilty about it."

"Is it an honor? Are you moved?"

"...How can you say that like that? You're a weird bastard."

Zhenya clicked his tongue in discomfort and resumed walking. They crossed a yellow field, ready for autumn, and entered a dense birch forest. Sunlight filtered through the tall trees in thin beams. The shadows and the cool air wrapped around them, and Taekjoo breathed deeply, feeling the fragrant air from the bushes rejuvenating his lungs.

"It's nice."

"You like it here?"

"Hmm, well, the air is fresh and peaceful… It's perfect for resting."

"Then you do like it, Taekjoo?"

"It's your island, so what does it matter if I like it or not?"

Taekjoo laughed softly as he continued forward. Zhenya didn't follow immediately, standing still as if lost in deep thought. Taekjoo couldn't understand why.

The two of them passed through the forest they had walked countless times during hunts and climbed the slope. As they walked, thinking of contemplating the island from above, they came upon a cliff. It was the place where, long ago, Taekjoo had fallen while being chased by intruders. When Zhenya had finally come to find him, Taekjoo, unconscious, had clutched the hem of Zhenya's clothes with the last of his strength. He was the only person who had begged Zhenya for his life, though Zhenya had seemed like a god of death to him. That day, Zhenya had returned to the mansion with Taekjoo, tormented by countless thoughts and struggles.

Taekjoo stood at the edge of the cliff, gazing into the deep abyss. Zhenya, standing beside him, asked cautiously:

"Does it remind you of anything?"

"Hmm? No. Did something happen here?"

Taekjoo wore an expression of complete ignorance. Zhenya, looking at him in silence, shook his head. He felt a complex mix of emotions. While there was relief in seeing that Taekjoo seemed to have forgotten the humiliation at Ajinoki, he also felt an odd emptiness. No, it was more like a sense of anxiety.

The two spent their days as if they were on vacation. Without worrying about time, they ate when they were hungry and enjoyed naps after feeling satisfied. They lounged carelessly on the couch, watching classic movies or old sports matches. When the mood struck, they held impromptu music sessions, and under the night sky, they lit a bonfire to drink until dawn. They even spent half a day just rolling around in front of the stove, doing nothing at all.

At every moment, Kwon Taekjoo would throw out endless questions. In addition to the surface-level information he'd learned about Zhenya, there was so much more that intrigued him.

"What do you like?"

One time, he asked casually, and Zhenya raised his eyebrows in surprise. Perhaps it was too vague of a question. Taekjoo was about to clarify when Zhenya suddenly looked at him. The unexpected response gave him a little shiver down his spine.

"Oh, seriously. I mean, things you like, like food."

"Nothing in particular."

Zhenya, who hadn't hesitated in his answer, then flashed a mischievous grin. He leaned against Taekjoo, pressing his body against him. He continued to firmly massage Taekjoo's solid ass, while keeping Taekjoo's flushed ear in his mouth.

"Well, if we're talking about that, it's a different story."

"You're always looking for a chance to joke around."

Taekjoo swatted Zhenya's hand away as if he were shooing away a fly. Then, he rubbed his flushed ear with the back of his hand and stubbornly asked again.

"Don't you have a dish you eat often?"

"...You're persistent."

"I'll do it."

"You?"

Zhenya's eyes filled with skepticism. He eyed Taekjoo with distrust before responding dismissively.

"Fine, it's nothing special. Just say it."

Zhenya confessed, with a somewhat disinterested expression, that he liked the Russian fish soup *"Ukha."* Immediately, Taekjoo went out fishing. With a plentiful catch, he began to prepare the Ukha. He felt embarrassed about always receiving food, and he wanted to offer his lover something delicious at least once.

The problem was that he had no talent for cooking. He barely remembered if he'd ever even tried Ukha. So, reluctantly, he looked up pictures and descriptions of the soup to try to make it as close as possible to what Zhenya liked. He thought that by cooking it thoroughly, anything could taste good.

The fish cooked slowly, and the broth turned cloudy. He tasted a spoonful carefully and immediately frowned.

“Ugh, this is incredibly bad.”

He stuck out his tongue in disgust. Zhenya, who had approached, silently looked at the pot. He tasted the soup without complaint. Although it should have tasted like fish and been bland, he didn’t show it on his face. Instead, he let out an inexplicable laugh.

“Why that reaction?”

“Even if you’ve lost your memory, you still have the same touch in the kitchen, Taekjoo.”

“It’s because I’ve never done this before.”

“You think it would be different if you had? How optimistic.”

“Ah, bastard. Take it and eat it, thinking about the effort I put into making it.”

Muttering, Taekjoo added a generous amount of salt to try to fix the flavor. Then, he served the soup in a large bowl and placed it on the table.

Kwon Taekjoo took a deep breath as he looked at the Ukha before him. It would take a lot of courage to bring a spoonful to his mouth. However, perhaps because of the excessive amount of salt, the soup, which had initially seemed bland and greasy, was now so salty it was almost impossible to eat. He quickly took a sip of water and tried to tell Zhenya not to eat it, but Zhenya kept eating with a smile.

It seemed that, despite how bad it was, Zhenya was willing to eat the food that Taekjoo had made with effort. Rather than criticizing harshly, Zhenya appeared more appreciative, which moved Taekjoo even more.

He slowly stood up and leaned toward Zhenya while supporting himself on the table. Zhenya looked up, and in that moment, Taekjoo gave him a gentle kiss on the lips. Zhenya’s eyes widened in surprise. Taekjoo smiled and sat back down, picking up his soup again.

“It’s a bit better now.”

With a playful expression, Taekjoo smiled as Zhenya lunged at him, skidding across the table and falling to the floor with the chair. Zhenya, covering him completely, kissed him passionately, as if he were trying to steal Taekjoo’s breath away. The hunger and pain of the moment faded, and Taekjoo wondered if married life was always this intense.

“Take it slow, bastard. I’m not going anywhere.”

Taekjoo laughed weakly as he caressed Zhenya. Zhenya, skillfully, positioned himself over him and took control of the kiss, gentle yet intense.

“.....”

While receiving Taekjoo’s affectionate kisses, Zhenya gripped the collar of his shirt tightly. Every time he felt overwhelmed by the warmth Taekjoo gave him, his anxiety also grew. Although Taekjoo had overcome the painful past and had become his lover, Zhenya couldn’t

be sure he would stay in the present once his memories returned. Perhaps the best thing would be for those painful memories to disappear entirely, even if that meant forgetting the happy moments they had shared.

It was uncertain when Taekjoo would regain all his memories and how they would endure the confusion and trials that would come. Despite living days that felt like a dream, Zhenya couldn't shake off the unease. He felt as though he were walking on a thin layer of ice under the spring sun.

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Chapter End Notes

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Turn On

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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"Where are you going?"

Kwon Taekjoo's eyes were fixed on Zhenya, unwavering. It was impossible not to stare, especially since Zhenya had suddenly appeared wearing a uniform. Was it an FSB uniform? Normally, a country's ambassador didn't perform special forces duties, but with Russia, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

"I need to head to Moscow for a bit."

Zhenya replied while adjusting his cap. The shadow from the brim accentuated his sharp nose and defined jawline even more. Moscow… Was it an order from his superiors? What was going on? Anything that mobilized the FSB under the Russian government's watch didn't seem like good news for Korea.

"How long will it take?"

Zhenya paused at the question, fixing his gaze on Taekjoo. For some reason, the corners of his mouth began to curve into a slow smile.

"What? Why?"

"Are you going to miss me?"

"What are you talking about?"

"No need to be embarrassed. And don't worry about missing me. It won't take a day."

No matter what he said, Zhenya always twisted it into his own narrative. Taekjoo couldn't tell if it was boundless confidence or sheer arrogance.

"I don't care if you take your time or drag it out."

"Just don't cry saying you missed me."

Zhenya chuckled as he stepped closer. Then, with one hand, he leaned against the headboard of the bed where Taekjoo was sitting, caging him in his arms. Taekjoo didn't feel pressured—he was completely absorbed in the surreal sight before him.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Are you seriously asking?"

At Taekjoo's blunt response, Zhenya's eyes narrowed slightly, the corners of his lips curling with satisfaction. Honestly, it was hard not to stare. He had never seen anyone look this good in a uniform. Sure, his late father and brother had looked dignified in their formal attire, but he'd never been this captivated by them. Zhenya, on the other hand, seemed born to wear it.

Gently, Taekjoo reached up and lifted Zhenya's cap off his head.

"This bastard, so unnecessarily good-looking."

Taekjoo murmured softly, as if talking to himself. Without warning, Zhenya grabbed Taekjoo's chin and kissed him in one fluid motion. A soft sound accompanied the kiss as Zhenya's tongue slipped between Taekjoo's lips. At first, it seemed like a tender kiss, but soon, an unfamiliar pill was pushed into his mouth.

Taekjoo froze, staring at him in shock.

Zhenya leaned back slightly, took a sip of water, and pressed their lips together again. Silently, Taekjoo allowed the water and pill to slide down his throat. His Adam's apple moved faintly as he swallowed.

Still, Zhenya was thorough. As if to confirm, his tongue roamed every corner of Taekjoo's mouth, ensuring there was no trace left. Taekjoo's eyelids grew heavy, his energy draining away as he slipped into a dazed state.

"Rest well."

Zhenya whispered close to his ear, his voice low and steady. When Taekjoo's eyes finally closed, Zhenya tucked the blanket around him and quietly stepped away.

The door clicked softly shut as Zhenya left the room. Not long after, the distant thrum of helicopter blades echoed, the vibrations rattling the windows.

"....."

As the sound faded into the distance, Taekjoo's eyes snapped open.

He sat up abruptly, rushing to the bathroom. There, he forced himself to vomit, and the pill that had only just reached his esophagus came out intact. His body heaved with nausea, trembling as he retched repeatedly.

"Haa…"

He wiped the saliva from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand, struggling to steady his breathing. The fact that his lover had tried to drug him into sleep before leaving spoke volumes. It wasn't just about trust—it meant Zhenya had doubted him all along. At the same time, Taekjoo couldn't help but wonder what had driven Zhenya to such extremes. What was he so afraid of?

There was a lot to uncover while Zhenya was away.

With his heart racing, Taekjoo shot to his feet, driven by urgency.

Zhenya's helicopter descended onto the FSB headquarters. As he stepped off the landing pad, a familiar figure was waiting for him: Bazim's assistant.

"Welcome."

Zhenya barely acknowledged the greeting, heading straight into the building. The assistant guided him to the director's office. After knocking, a voice from inside gave permission to enter—it was Bazim's.

Inside, the director sat beside Bazim, who occupied the seat of honor. Zhenya didn't bother with pleasantries. Ignoring both Bazim and the director, his superior, he strode to the chair opposite them, sat down, and crossed his long legs. Despite his casual attitude, no one criticized his lack of formality. All eyes were on him, intrigued by his unexpected appearance in uniform.

Crossing his arms, Zhenya got straight to the point.

"What's this about?"

Even though it was his first time seeing Bazim since their meeting in Iran, Zhenya didn't waste time on greetings. Bazim didn't seem to expect any, either.

"I hear you've brought a South Korean spy with you."

Bazim's sudden mention of Kwon Taekjoo wasn't surprising. It was clear he'd already shared the details with the director. After all, when crossing from Greece into Russia, Zhenya had declared Kwon Taekjoo as his personal assistant to secure entry. He'd also long known that both the Russian government and his family monitored his every move.

Zhenya tilted his head slightly, his expression indifferent.

"And?"

“The Kremlin knows, too.”

“Knows what?”

“Yevgeny, I mean they’re aware that you’re sheltering that South Korean spy. The same one who infiltrated Vladivostok like a rat, digging into our secrets. The same man who smuggled the North Korean scientist out of Iran.”

Bazim’s sharp gaze bore into Zhenya as he spoke. Zhenya listened impassively, his expression unreadable. Bazim sighed deeply before continuing.

“The Kremlin’s on edge. War might break out soon.”

Zhenya’s brow furrowed.

“…War?”

“Those bastards who’ve always been a thorn in our side—they’re somehow linked to the Tehran terror attack, aren’t they? It feels like the perfect time, don’t you think?”

Bazim’s tone was confident. Zhenya mulled over his words, then let out a derisive laugh.

“So, he’s finally lost it.”

Bazim and the director exchanged a glance and nodded silently. It was clear Bazim didn’t desire war, and Zhenya understood that stance. Leaning forward, Bazim locked eyes with Zhenya.

“What should we do?”

Bazim’s question carried weight, and Zhenya knew it. He needed clarity on his role in this situation.

“The Kremlin wants proof of your loyalty.”

A crooked smile tugged at Zhenya’s lips.

“Are they asking me to fight in this absurd war?”

“If it’s going to happen, it’s better to end it swiftly and decisively.”

“If it doesn’t start, there’s nothing to end.”

Bazim pressed his lips together. The FSB director, essentially the Kremlin’s eyes and ears, remained a silent observer. Zhenya, fully aware of this, didn’t hold back.

“Bazim, it seems you’re not thrilled about this either.”

“The Kremlin’s will is mine. It’s also the will of our family—and it should be yours too.”

“That’s why you’re nothing but a Kremlin lapdog.”

Zhenya's cold laugh made his stance clear.

"I'm not giving them anything. Tell them to stop trying."

A tense silence fell over the room. Unexpectedly, it was the director who broke it. He stood abruptly, drew a gun, and aimed it at Zhenya's head.

Despite the threat, neither Zhenya nor Bazim flinched. They simply stared at each other.

Then, a synchronized array of red laser dots appeared through the window, targeting Zhenya's chest and forehead. It was a perfectly coordinated move.

"You'll have to hand it over, brother. This is my last warning as family."

Even in a life-or-death situation, Zhenya remained unfazed. He glanced at the barrel of the gun pointed at him and muttered,

"Then let me give you a warning as well, brother."

He shifted his gaze to Bazim, his lips curling into a sly grin.

"Before I came here, I activated something."

Bazim and the director exchanged worried looks. Zhenya confirmed their fears.

"That's right. If I don't stop it in time, it'll launch. And it will launch even if I die."

"What the hell did you do?"

The director's enraged shout echoed in the room. Bazim, his face grave, awaited an explanation.

Zhenya chuckled darkly before replying.

"What you've all been so eager to know: Anastasia."

Bazim and the director paled instantly. They understood better than anyone the catastrophic power of "Anastasia." If Zhenya had truly activated it, there was no turning back. Capable of bypassing any defense system with pinpoint accuracy and the destructive force of a nuclear bomb, "Anastasia" was unstoppable. Its impact would obliterate both the Kremlin and the FSB headquarters.

Rising calmly, Zhenya moved as the laser sights followed his every step. Looking at Bazim, frozen with fear, Zhenya made his position crystal clear.

"I'm not giving you anything. Don't even think about taking it. If you try, you'll pay the price."

"Yevgeny… Are you really willing to take this to the end?"

“You seem to misunderstand. I haven’t done anything yet, Bazim. So make sure it stays that way.”

With that final warning, Zhenya turned and walked out. Neither Bazim, the director, nor the agents prepared for confrontation dared to move as Zhenya calmly exited on his own terms.

Zhenya returned to Ajinoki as the sun dipped below the horizon. Flying overhead, he noticed a strip of cloth fluttering in the breeze from the birch forest. He immediately recognized it and sighed. He never stays put.

As soon as the helicopter landed on the rooftop, Zhenya headed toward the forest. Among the tall, dense trees, a familiar figure dangled, swaying in midair. It was Kwon Taekjoo, caught in his paraglider.

Once again, he had crash-landed into the trees. Below him, a combat knife was embedded in the ground, likely from a failed attempt to cut himself free. It was no different from his last desperate escape attempt.

Zhenya crossed his arms and looked up at Taekjoo.

“What are you doing up there?”

“Oh… You’re back already? That was quick.”

Taekjoo greeted him with a sheepish grin, awkwardly explaining.

“Well, I got bored being alone… I checked the storage and found a paraglider. Thought I’d take a look around the island…”

Shaking his head, Zhenya picked up the knife from the ground and, just like before, threw it sharply. The blade sliced cleanly through the cords of the parachute.

With a yelp, Taekjoo plummeted to the ground. Zhenya caught him effortlessly, extending his arms. Taekjoo, curled up and braced for impact, relaxed when he realized he hadn’t crashed. Opening his tightly shut eyes, he saw he was unharmed and exhaled heavily.

“Ugh! I thought you were going to skewer me with that knife! If you’re going to save me, can’t you do it a little safer…?”

“Your body’s cold. You’ve been swimming in the ocean too, haven’t you?”

Taekjoo averted his gaze with a nervous laugh.

“Well, the sun was nice…”

“You’re still thinking about escaping. Always.”

“Uh, it’s not like I was trying to escape…”

“Don’t forget, there’s no way off this island on your own, Taekjoo. The winds and currents won’t let you go. No matter what you do, you’ll end up back here.”

Taekjoo let out a quiet sigh, seemingly realizing why his surfing and paragliding efforts always ended so miserably.

Zhenya hoisted him up and carried him back to the mansion. Still embarrassed, Taekjoo squirmed in his arms the entire way.

"Hey, I can walk. Put me down."

"You realize how ridiculous you look, don't you?"

With a sarcastic tone, Zhenya let him down, almost tossing him aside. Then, without a glance back, he strode toward the mansion with long, purposeful steps, clearly annoyed. Kwon Taekjoo hurried to catch up, calling after him, "Let’s walk together," his tone conciliatory.

After swimming in the sea and being stuck in a tree for hours, Taekjoo’s body wasn’t cooperating. The more he walked, the more the gap between them grew.

"Ugh, it's freezing. Did everything go well with your work outside?"

"Why ask if you don't really care?"

"What are you talking about, you jerk? Of course, I’m curious."

"Hmm."

"So, are you planning to stay here indefinitely? Isn’t this just a summer house? Don’t you have a primary residence somewhere else?"

"We’re staying here. Both you and I."

Zhenya looked at Kwon Taekjoo and delivered his words with finality. It was both advice and a warning—any escape attempts would be futile. His tone, paired with the biting wind, made it clear he was still upset. Taekjoo’s betrayal, despite all Zhenya had done for him, had evidently hurt him.

"Hey, I’m sorry. Don’t be mad."

"Who said I’m mad?"

"You're clearly upset—what’s wrong?"

"You’re underestimating me."

"It’s not that... I just thought I’d call Jongwoo quickly and then come back. Can you imagine how worried Jongwoo and Olga must be? The way we vanished under those tense circumstances. I’m worried, too—about whether Jongwoo made it back to Korea safely. Plus, I wanted to call my mom..."

Before he could finish his explanation, Zhenya abruptly spun around. Taekjoo, nearly jogging now to keep up, kept chattering in an attempt to diffuse the tension.

"This island is pretty amazing after exploring it. It's huge—there are mountains, forests, the sea, and even a small lake. It's still autumn, so the plants and flowers are stunning. What's it like in summer? It must feel like Switzerland. And in winter, I bet it's like Iceland. I even saw an animal earlier—looked like a reindeer, and it had calves."

It was a tactic Taekjoo used to soothe his lover. While he often compared him to the little woman, in that moment, Taekjoo resembled her more than ever—chatty and a touch coy. It was a side of him that only appeared when he was drunk or desperately trying to mend fences.

By the time they reached the mansion, Zhenya was silent, focusing on lighting the fire in the **pechka.** Taekjoo wrapped himself in a fur blanket. Though he'd been talking incessantly on the walk back, his lips were now blue, trembling from the cold.

Zhenya headed straight to the bathroom and began filling the tub with warm water. Taekjoo, wordlessly following, stripped down as Zhenya gestured for him to get in. Without hesitation, Taekjoo slid into the bath, the water spilling over and soaking Zhenya's shoes.

"Wash yourself."

Zhenya said curtly, turning to leave. But before he could step away, Taekjoo unexpectedly called out.

"Yevgeny."

Zhenya paused, surprised by the sudden interruption. When he turned, he saw Taekjoo resting his head on the edge of the tub, looking up at him.

"What is it?"

"Want to join me?"

The proposal made Zhenya's brow furrow. It was clearly an attempt at seduction—completely unlike Taekjoo. Their intimate encounters in the bath had always been initiated by Zhenya, with Taekjoo reluctantly giving in. For him to provoke first like this? It was either an effort to placate Zhenya or to use his warmth to fight the chill.

Taekjoo's unexpected boldness left Zhenya conflicted, uncertain whether to step closer or walk away.

"You need to wash up too, don't you?"

Taekjoo added, his tone light as he flicked a droplet of water from his ear. Zhenya's dark eyes locked onto Taekjoo's face. A bead of water slid from Taekjoo's reddened ear, landing with a soft plink in the bath. Zhenya's lips twisted into an odd expression, a mix of disbelief and amusement, as he let out a soft scoff.

"Don't like the idea? If you don't want to, just say so—"

A sound like something shattering in his mind snapped Zhenya into motion. Without a word, he lunged toward Taekjoo, capturing his lips in a kiss so intense it bordered on painful.

"Ugh..."

With a splash, their bodies intertwined and fell together. Without paying attention to details like the tip of the nose, the curve of the upper lip, the lower lip, or the chin, their mouths pressed together in a hurried frenzy. Their lips stayed tightly sealed as Zhenya sucked and tugged on Kwon Taekjoo's tongue, which hesitated inside his mouth. Taekjoo weakly tried to push Zhenya's hand away, the one firmly holding his face, as if to signal him to stop. But Zhenya ignored the plea, consumed by his stubborn passion.

The only pause came when Zhenya tilted his head for another kiss, giving them a fleeting moment to breathe. Each time their lips met, the water surged violently around them, cascading loudly from their fevered movements. The sounds of splashing, the intensified scent of the moment, and the sight of nothing but each other overwhelmed their senses.

Zhenya dragged his tongue across Taekjoo's swollen lips, savoring them before plunging into his mouth once more. He teased and wrestled Taekjoo's tongue, driving it deeper until he saw the flush of red bloom across Taekjoo's face. Only then did he withdraw, his tongue curling as it retreated.

Their tongues clashed again, a relentless dance of push and pull. Their hands, desperate and unyielding, gripped each other's faces and hair. Finally, when they could no longer catch their breath, they broke apart, their heaving shoulders moving in unison like they'd silently agreed on it. Even with their faces so close their noses brushed, neither could look away.

Taekjoo gently caressed Zhenya's cheek, the one he had clutched so tightly moments ago, and inhaled his faint, shaky breath. Then, with a playful smile, he planted light, teasing kisses on Zhenya's lips, coaxing him. When Zhenya dove back in for another fervent kiss, Taekjoo eagerly returned the intensity, cradling his face with both hands.

Zhenya kissed him hungrily, all the while peeling off his wet clothes with an urgency that almost tore them apart. Each time their lips parted, Taekjoo assisted, helping to strip away the damp layers. He even tugged open the top of Zhenya's uniform and buried his face into the exposed skin of his neck. Zhenya let out a breath that sounded almost like laughter.

"You really like this outfit, don't you?"

"...If you can't tell, maybe you need glasses."

Amid the playful banter, their kisses slowed, shedding the desperation that had gripped them moments earlier. The water, which had once roared with their movements, now murmured softly around them. Zhenya nibbled on Taekjoo's lips, then let his tongue trace the curve of his upper lip, drawing it into his mouth with a lingering suction that pulled Taekjoo closer. Naturally, Taekjoo shifted to settle on top of him.

Without hesitation, Taekjoo followed Zhenya's lead, pressing his lips against every inch of his face. Zhenya smiled, his fingers tracing the straight line of Taekjoo's back.

"You're being unusually good, Taekjoo. You must've been lonely."

"Didn't you know? I've been thinking about undressing you since this morning."

"Oh, really?"

Zhenya lifted his head and placed a soft, almost playful kiss on Taekjoo's lips, as if knocking on a door. Then, he continued with a series of light, quick kisses. Taekjoo languidly licked Zhenya's lips before gently sucking on his tongue. A soft groan escaped Zhenya, followed by the faintest shiver on his flushed cheeks.

They continued with playful kisses, caressing each other's ears and backs. Before long, Zhenya was rubbing his heavy cock against Kwon Taekjoo's own. Both were already hard, so the simple act of brushing against each other brought on an intense surge of pleasure.

Kwon Taekjoo, who had been trembling moments ago, began moving his hips on his own, their bodies pressing and grinding against each other mercilessly. They explored one another with fervor, and every time their lips parted, they sought each other again for another dizzying kiss. The intensity was overwhelming, leaving them lightheaded.

"… Wait a second."

"A second?"

Zhenya responded slyly as his hands roamed over Kwon Taekjoo's body. His broad, pale hands moved slowly from Taekjoo's Adam's apple to his chest and down to his abdomen. As his fingers brushed over Taekjoo's chest, they grazed his nipples lightly. The lack of firm attention to the areas he craved made Taekjoo shift his hips, revealing a deep sense of frustration.

A satisfied smirk curled on Zhenya's lips.

"Do you remember what spots you like?"

"What are you even saying? You're just teasing me."

"Are you pretending not to know? Looks like you're begging me to get started."

Zhenya supported Taekjoo's waist, guiding him into a seated position with his knees bent. He brought Taekjoo's arms behind his own shoulders, pulling their bodies closer until Taekjoo was pressed fully against his chest. When Zhenya's warm tongue flicked over his nipples, Taekjoo's breathing grew uneven. As if answering Taekjoo's unspoken desires, Zhenya pinched and rolled the sensitive buds between his fingers, applying just the right amount of pressure.

"Ah… yes… ah, that's not really…"

Despite his words, Taekjoo's torso clung tightly to Zhenya's face. With one arm, he cradled Zhenya's head, pressing him closer. Zhenya, a playful grin still on his lips, sucked fervently at the tender skin. The sharp, pulsating sensation spreading through Taekjoo's chest made his hips tremble uncontrollably.

"Ahh… ugh… yes… ahhh…"

Zhenya pulled back with a wet sound, releasing Taekjoo's chest from his mouth. Faint bite marks surrounded the flushed areola, evidence of Zhenya's intense attention.

"You can't keep your hips still because you like it so much, Taekjoo."

"Ugh… yes…"

With each breath Taekjoo took, his chest rose and fell in rhythm. His reddened nipples, glistening with saliva, looked as if they had been coated in syrup. Zhenya brushed the tip of his nose against one of them in a teasing motion.

"Do you want me to suck on them more? Hmm, Taekjoo?"

"Ah… don't ask me that…"

"Instead, maybe you should take care of this too."

Zhenya rammed his hard cock between Kwon Taekjoo's legs, which were tightly pressed together. The thick shaft pushed its way between the strong thighs, while a protruding vein bulged on Zhenya's forehead.

"Ahh..."

Moaning in satisfaction from the tight pressure, Zhenya bit into Kwon Taekjoo's chest again. He firmly held his back to prevent him from escaping, while stimulating his cock with swift movements. Zhenya also began to move his hips, grinding his cock vigorously against Kwon Taekjoo's inner thighs. The bathroom, which had been silent, filled again with the roar of water splashing uncontrollably.

"Ahh, ahh, ugh, mmm..."

"Ahh, ugh, yes, ahh... fuck..."

Kwon Taekjoo moaned sweetly as he closed his thighs tightly, trying to contain his growing arousal. The pressure increased, causing Zhenya to frown, his moans filled Kwon Taekjoo's ears and further ignited his desire.

Everything began to flash before his eyes. It was as if his brain was boiling, and his whole body was melting under the intense heat he felt.

Soon, their bodies intertwined even tighter.

"Ahh, ugh, ahhh!"

“Ahh, ahhh, mmph!”

Both bodies erupted in a white climax simultaneously. Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya held each other closely as their bodies trembled from the strong waves of pleasure. As the intense heat subsided, their bodies began to cool down rapidly, shivering softly.

“Ugh... ahh, ahh... yes...”

Kwon Taekjoo panted softly, resting his head against Zhenya’s shoulder. His warm, damp breath continuously brushed against Zhenya’s nape, sending shivers down his spine. Each subtle movement of Zhenya’s body caused Taekjoo to sway gently along with him. It was an odd sensation—unfamiliar yet comforting, almost grounding.

Zhenya pressed soft kisses against Taekjoo’s neck, murmuring his name. His voice carried a quiet, soothing warmth that melted into the somnolent atmosphere.

“Taekjoo.”

“…Yes.”

Taekjoo mumbled lazily, his voice thick with exhaustion.

“Taekjoo.”

“Yes.”

“Taekjoo.”

Zhenya kept repeating his name, planting tender, feather-light kisses along his skin. The gentle insistence made Taekjoo chuckle weakly.

“What is it?”

“Once more.”

Zhenya murmured, holding onto Taekjoo’s tired cock like he was unwilling to let him slip away. Taekjoo exhaled heavily but indulged him, nodding as he let out a soft, *“Yes.”*

In an instant, Zhenya’s demeanor shifted. He repositioned them, pressing Taekjoo against the cool tile wall of the bathroom. His movements were deliberate, firm, and left no room for resistance. He pinned Taekjoo’s arms behind his back, holding him in place so he couldn’t escape.

“Hey, what are you doing all of a sudden?”

“Taekjoo, Taekjoo…”

He called out to him with an almost desperate urgency, while keeping him firmly trapped between the wall and his own body. Without hesitation, he nibbled on his ear, causing Kwon Taekjoo's body to tremble involuntarily. He felt Zhenya's teeth gently biting his sensitive ear,

and his soft tongue caressing intensely. Meanwhile, Zhenya's cock made its way between Kwon Taekjoo's thighs, thrusting firmly.

Zhenya's cock, which was moving back and forth while brushing against his scrotum, moved deeply, repeatedly grinding against Kwon Taekjoo's cock. With each movement, Zhenya pressed his body even closer, causing Kwon Taekjoo to press even harder against the wall, his chest being crushed. Kwon Taekjoo's sensitive nipples rubbed against the rough tiles, giving him a strange feeling of pleasure.

“A-Ah, wait. Wait... This is rubbing against me and it feels weird, ah, damn...!”

“Haa, ugh, Taekjoo… Taekjoo…”

Though he tried to stop him, it was useless. Zhenya, completely immersed, frantically kissed the back of Kwon Taekjoo's neck, ignoring his words. The sound of splashing water echoed in the bathroom nonstop.

Kwon Taekjoo exhaled deeply, his hand brushing against his chest. Even the slightest touch sent a sharp sting through him. Had the skin torn? He couldn’t understand Zhenya’s obsession with relentlessly sucking on his chest every time. Groaning, he shifted slightly, leaning his weight onto the table. Every joint in his body seemed to protest, as if he’d been adrift at sea too long—or perhaps from the chill of the winds that swept down from the birches. He couldn’t tell if it was Zhenya’s antics or just sheer exhaustion catching up with him.

Despite not having reached the height of intimacy, his body already felt completely drained. He wondered if, when they finally went all the way, he’d end up bedridden for days. Up until now, he’d always thought of sex as relatively simple and straightforward—nothing too complicated. But with a man as his lover, everything had changed. What he initially intended as a way to warm his body without strings attached had turned into something far more complex than he’d anticipated.

"Ugh..."

Even the inside of his thighs, raw from constant friction with Zhenya’s cock, burned intensely. When he glanced down to inspect his legs, he noticed the tattooed area was reddened and covered in marks. He was almost certain bruises would form by morning.

He still couldn’t fathom why he’d decided to get a tattoo when it was strictly forbidden for agents. Worse, he’d seriously considered leaving the NIS after his last mission.

Had he been that enamored with Zhenya back then?

Lifting his head, his eyes fell on Zhenya, who was standing at the kitchen counter, cooking something. His broad, pale back was lined with scratch marks, souvenirs of Kwon Taekjoo’s instinctive reactions during Zhenya’s wild behavior. Yet Zhenya seemed entirely unbothered —in fact, his posture radiated satisfaction as he stirred the pot. From where he sat, Taekjoo could tell how pleased he was. *“Hey,”* Taekjoo called suddenly, catching his attention.

“The tattoo I have—this was your idea, wasn’t it?”

“That was my birthday gift.”

“How can something inked on my body be your birthday gift? It’s not even your name.”

Frowning in confusion, Taekjoo shot him a skeptical look. Zhenya, however, simply smiled, his voice teasing.

“Oh? Should I have had my name inked instead? Would that have been better?”

He seemed entirely serious, as if ready to have his name etched onto the other side if Taekjoo wasn’t satisfied. Taekjoo glared at him, shaking his head vehemently.

“That’s not what I’m saying, you bastard!”

But as always, Zhenya ignored his protests, turning back around with a smug expression, humming softly as if the matter were already settled. No matter what Taekjoo said, Zhenya always managed to twist things to suit himself.

Scars on his body might be seen as medals, but any other marks were just unnecessary scribbles. That belief hadn’t changed—then or now. And yet, had he relented because Zhenya had asked? Or had he done it thinking he’d soon retire? How much did Zhenya really mean to him, for him to make such a decision? After all, choosing a man as his lover had already been one of the hardest decisions of his life.

As he mulled over these thoughts, a familiar aroma wafted to his nose.

“Hmm? Is that... kimchi jjigae?”

“You’ve got a bloodhound’s nose.”

Zhenya brought over a pot of kimchi jjigae. Though it was instant food, it was packed with meat and kimchi, the ingredients overflowing. Just seeing the rich broth made Taekjoo’s mouth water.

Zhenya soon placed another bowl on the table. Inside was a soup with a light amber hue. The mere smell of it made Taekjoo’s stomach turn.

“This is delicious. You should try it with me.”

“What you call food is practically chemical warfare, Taekjoo.”

Zhenya glanced at the dish with visible distaste. Comparing kimchi jjigae to biological weapons was excessive, even for Zhenya.

“Do you have a baby’s tongue or what, you bastard?”

Taekjoo looked at him incredulously, laughing at the absurdity of the comment. But his laughter was cut short when Zhenya suddenly leaned over and kissed him.

“What... what are you doing? Why so suddenly?”

“Every time you talk, it’s always something about babies.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“Don’t lie, you bastard.”

“You might be embarrassed, but it’s true. You’d always whine, ‘baby, baby,’ in this pitiful tone whenever you were with me.”

“...No way.”

“Hmm.”

“Really? Am I crazy or what?”

Taekjoo muttered, berating himself as if he were talking about someone else entirely. Zhenya chuckled softly, shaking his head. Maybe he’d had a rough day outside, or perhaps he’d misunderstood something, thinking Taekjoo had tried to run away—something that might explain his distant mood earlier. But now, Zhenya’s sour mood seemed to have lifted.

Seeing him happy brought Taekjoo a strange sense of relief. Since things had come to this, he figured he might as well lean into the moment. Even if he returned to Korea immediately, there was no guarantee his memories would fully return, and there wasn’t much he could do regardless.

“I won’t go anywhere alone from now on.”

“...Why so suddenly?”

“Besides, I can’t leave here without your permission anyway. And I don’t see any urgent reason to return if my lover insists we stay together. Even if I went back now, I couldn’t work in this state. Though, it’d be nice if I could at least contact headquarters or Yoo Jongwoo…”

He looked at Zhenya, who, unsurprisingly, gave him a knowing look as if to say, *I knew it.* Feeling slightly embarrassed, Taekjoo shook his head.

“That’s fine. You can do that whenever you want.”

“Why are you acting so considerate? Are you trying to lull me into complacency before stabbing me in the back later?”

“Is there anything you can’t tell your lover?”

Zhenya shot him a mocking look. Had Kwon Taekjoo in the past been a master at betraying his lover? A compulsive liar with every word he spoke? Feeling uneasy, Taekjoo scratched his cheek and responded.

“I’m just trying to accept it.”

“Accept what?”

“For some reason, I feel like I’ve never really earned my lover’s trust, and now you insist on not letting me go. What can I do? Everything you’re going through is because of me—because after promising I’d come back soon, I died, lost all my memories, and made you worry. It’s all my fault, so I have to take responsibility.”

“Take responsibility?”

“Yeah. Until I get my memories back, I’ll stay here with you. Jongwoo must have already reported to HQ. Besides, I was told my last mission ended successfully. Back then, whenever I wrapped up big assignments, I’d come here to spend my vacations with you, right? If we live like we used to, maybe the memories I’ve lost will start to return.”

Zhenya remained silent, listening. Even though Taekjoo was telling him he’d stay and spend time with him—exactly what Zhenya had always wanted—his expression wasn’t as happy as one might expect. Instead, his face seemed clouded with mixed thoughts.

Watching Zhenya’s expression, Taekjoo asked bluntly:

“By the way, what did we used to do here?”

“We made bets constantly. Fishing, skiing, hunting, even rock-paper-scissors…”

“Rock-paper-scissors? What kind of bet is that? What did we wager?”

“The winner got to make a wish.”

Since childhood, Kwon Taekjoo had always been fiercely competitive. If he wasn’t going to do something, he wouldn’t bother. But if he committed to it, he *had* to come out on top. The stronger the opponent, the more his fighting spirit flared up. In that sense, Zhenya was the perfect rival. In fact, Zhenya probably fueled his drive to win even more.

“And what kind of wishes did I ask for?”

“You never made one. You always lost to me.”

“Don’t make me laugh. Even if I don’t have all my memories, every word you say has to be a lie, doesn’t it?”

“It’s the truth, Taekjoo. The only thing you ever beat me at was rock-paper-scissors. And even then, you didn’t follow through with your wish because you gave up halfway.”

Was that true? Even if his opponent was his lover, Kwon Taekjoo would never let himself lose on purpose. The idea of throwing a match didn’t exist in his vocabulary. But the thought that the only time he ever won against Zhenya was in something as trivial as rock-paper-scissors was hard to swallow.

“That can’t be.”

“No matter how much you deny it, the truth doesn’t change.”

“Then, what was the wish I didn’t fulfill?”

“To leave me here and walk away.”

Zhenya’s response was calm and matter-of-fact. The weight of those words didn’t hit Taekjoo immediately. Was his wish really to abandon his lover and leave? Could he have been so despicable in the past? Was it possible for someone to fall so low in just a few years?

Maybe it was the confusion of having a man as his lover, but if he wasn’t willing to take responsibility, he shouldn’t have started this relationship in the first place. To come this far and then want to leave—it was unforgivable.

Even just looking at what had happened that day, Zhenya had picked him up from the birch forest as if it were nothing, patiently explaining the island’s features and warning him that no matter how hard he tried to escape, it wouldn’t work.

Wasn’t that proof of the countless failed escape attempts Kwon Taekjoo must have made in the past?

“I’m sorry.”

Scratching the back of his neck, Taekjoo apologized straightforwardly. Zhenya raised an eyebrow, leaning back in surprise.

“You’ve started apologizing a lot since you lost your memories. Before, all you cared about was figuring out what I did wrong and blaming everything on me.”

“I’m sorry about that too. I promise I’ll do better from now on.”

Taekjoo continued to apologize with sincere humility. At first, Zhenya seemed puzzled by his uncharacteristic behavior, but soon the corners of his lips curved into a satisfied smile.

“Then, it’s fine.”

When Zhenya emerged from the bathroom, Kwon Taekjoo was nowhere to be found. Thinking he might have fallen asleep, he headed toward the bedroom. The bed was neatly made. Passing by the pechka, where only a lone cup remained, he made his way to the living room. But there was no sign of Kwon Taekjoo there either—not even on the sofa by the window where he often napped.

Looking out the window, Zhenya scanned the surroundings. Finally, he spotted Kwon Taekjoo sitting by a campfire, gazing absentmindedly at the sky.

“...”

After watching him for a moment, Zhenya went to grab a bottle of whiskey and stepped outside. Even as Zhenya approached, Kwon Taekjoo made an effort not to turn his head. It was only when Zhenya sat down beside him that Taekjoo glanced at him briefly before shifting his gaze back to the dark night sky.

"It seems like there's no light pollution here. So many stars."

His eyes remained fixed on the sky. The vast expanse was completely cloudless, with countless stars scattered across it, both large and small. They shimmered as if competing with one another, glowing so brightly they looked as if they might fall from the sky.

Zhenya took a sip of the whiskey he'd brought and handed the bottle to Kwon Taekjoo. Without hesitation, Taekjoo accepted it, raised it to his lips, and drank. Then, he passed the bottle back. But when Zhenya reached for it, Taekjoo held it firmly, not letting go. Their eyes met in that moment. Taekjoo's gaze was intense, as if he were trying to decipher Zhenya's thoughts.

"Are you hiding something from me?"

The sudden question made Zhenya arch an eyebrow. He wasn't sure what Taekjoo was getting at. Had he noticed something? Or perhaps he had regained a fragment of memory? Zhenya studied Taekjoo in silence, attempting to gauge his intentions.

"Why do I get the feeling you're keeping something from me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Is that so? Then answer me this: why did you go out? Did something happen out there?"

It seemed Taekjoo was curious about where he'd gone, dressed in his uniform no less. But it wasn't something Taekjoo needed to know—or concern himself with.

Kwon Taekjoo, however, wasn't one to let silence linger. He pressed on.

"I've noticed there are anti-air missile installations all over the island. Are you in some kind of danger?"

"Why are you asking about that?"

"What kind of answer is that? It's normal for a boyfriend to be curious about all sorts of things."

Zhenya crossed his arms without a word, and Taekjoo, growing frustrated, suddenly seemed to realize something. Letting out a small exclamation, he decided to end the conversation definitively.

"I never asked. Not even once, about what you do or where you're from."

"...Well, that leaves me with nothing to say."

Taekjoo scratched the back of his neck with an awkward expression, avoiding Zhenya's gaze as if unsure how to proceed. Then, his eyes drifted upward toward the sky, and he abruptly changed the subject.

"Do you think we'll see the Northern Lights here?"

Zhenya gave a casual nod, and Taekjoo's face lit up in delight. His dark eyes seemed to sparkle—though perhaps it was just Zhenya's imagination.

"It'd be nice to see them together."

The words were murmured softly, accompanied by a faint smile. They seemed to entrance Zhenya, who found himself stepping closer to Taekjoo as if drawn by an unseen force. A shadow fell over Taekjoo's face as Zhenya leaned in.

Taekjoo let out a faint gasp but didn't resist as Zhenya kissed him. Their lips met lightly before Zhenya pulled back, his gaze fixed intently on Taekjoo's. Taekjoo stared back into Zhenya's blue eyes for a moment before suddenly ruffling his hair.

"You're unexpectedly full of charm [1], *huh?"*

"...Charm?"

It was a word Zhenya had never heard used to describe himself. He tilted his head, perplexed. The idea seemed almost absurd.

"It means you're cute."

Taekjoo gently patted Zhenya's cheek, then leaned in to kiss him on the lips again, this time pressing a little kiss to his ear as he played with it.

Zhenya felt bewildered. The Taekjoo who had lost his memory was entirely different from before. He acted soft, tender, and affectionate, as if being Zhenya's boyfriend was reason enough to care. Perhaps he had treated his past lovers this way too. If that was the case, it wouldn't be so bad if Kwon Taekjoo lost his memory forever. He would behave in a loving and apologetic way towards Zhenya, forgetting the bad experiences and staying by his side as a considerate lover.

The two men, like bulls locked in a territorial clash, pushed against each other with force as they stumbled into the mansion. They tried to shake off the cold that clung to their bodies, caressing and tugging at one another in the process. Their hands roamed necks, grasped hair, and brushed cheeks, seeking out the warmth of the other. In the fleeting moments it took to peel off their clothes, they couldn't resist the urgent need to kiss. The mix of alcohol and the heat from the stove quickly brought their bodies to a simmer.

Zhenya swept Kwon Taekjoo off his feet, lifting him effortlessly. Naturally, Taekjoo wrapped his legs around Zhenya's waist and clung to him, kissing him with practiced fervor. Zhenya tilted his head up, eagerly welcoming the slide of Taekjoo's tongue into his mouth. They

barely managed a few steps before slamming into the wall. Despite the violent impact, their lips remained locked, both too consumed with the need to devour one another.

Pressed against the wall, Taekjoo caressed Zhenya with tenderness, his touch reminiscent of someone awakening to desire for the first time. He patted Zhenya's cheek gently, as though asking him to slow down, and softened the moment by moving his tongue against Zhenya's with deliberate ease.

"Ah, Taekjoo…"

The breathy whisper only fueled Zhenya's excitement. His breathing ragged, he pressed Taekjoo harder against the wall, their bodies colliding with the wall and doorframe repeatedly. Each crash came with grunts and murmurs of pain. When Taekjoo finally winced audibly, he paused, glancing at Zhenya's face. The vivid blue of his eyes was tinged with red, inflamed by desire. The sight drew an involuntary laugh from Taekjoo.

"Are you a teenager in the throes of puberty or what? I'm not going anywhere. Let's take our time."

Taekjoo grinned as he brushed his thumb along Zhenya's cheek. Zhenya didn't respond verbally, instead holding his gaze, his dark eyes flickering between Taekjoo's. Without warning, Zhenya's body shuddered, and before Taekjoo could react, Zhenya lunged at him with renewed intensity. Their lips collided with such force that Taekjoo's gums tingled from the impact. Laughing in disbelief, Taekjoo tried to regain control, adjusting the pace of the kiss, savoring Zhenya's lips and tongue with deliberate slowness.

Each time their lips parted with a wet click, both gasped for air, only for Zhenya to pull him back instantly, as though the brief separation was unbearable. Taekjoo's head began to spin, completely overwhelmed by the intensity. The heat between them grew with every stolen breath Zhenya took from him.

"Slow down, yeah? Take it easy, Zhenya."

With soft words and a gentle touch, Taekjoo managed to temper Zhenya's voracity. He cradled Zhenya's face in his hands, planting slow, lingering kisses on his lips. Each kiss brought a faint smile to Zhenya's mouth, the corners curling upward with an almost angelic expression. His eyes, half-lidded in pure satisfaction, were mesmerizing. Unable to resist any longer, Taekjoo was the one who lunged forward this time, kissing him with renewed passion. Zhenya let out a soft chuckle, the warm breath tickling Taekjoo's throat and sparking an impatience that made him want more.

Finally, Zhenya sat at the edge of the bed, and Taekjoo, kneeling before him, let his hands wander up Zhenya's neck and chest. In one swift move, he reached the edge of Zhenya's shirt. Kissing his cheek and ear, he tore it apart with a sharp sound, the fabric splitting to reveal Zhenya's muscular torso. A bold eagle tattoo sprawled across his chest, its fierce gaze meeting Taekjoo's amused grin.

"This guy's giving me quite the attitude."

“Then punish him if you like.”

Zhenya replied with a playful smirk, his hand softly gripping the back of Taekjoo’s thigh to pull him closer. Taekjoo kept his eyes locked on Zhenya’s striking face as he unbuckled his belt and slid down the zipper of his pants. Zhenya watched intently, his head tilting slightly as he swallowed hard. Seeing him hold his breath, visibly trembling with anticipation, was breathtaking.

“How should I punish you?”

He muttered as he yanked his shirt off and suddenly pressed Zhenya's shoulders down. In an instant, Taekjoo climbed on top of Zhenya, firmly grasping his chest. Then, he pulled both mounds of flesh together so that they were touching and began to slowly rub his bulge over them.

“Ah?”

Realizing the meaning of that action, Zhenya brought up one hand to support his own head and with the other he pressed against Kwon Taekjoo's back. Desperately, Kwon Taekjoo grinded his erection against Zhenya's chest while licking his own plump lower lip. Unable to bear the tension any longer, he pulled down his underwear and took out his erection. His hard cock popped out. Carefully, he pushed the throbbing flesh between Zhenya's chest and began to move his hips. The firm mounds provided a rather pleasurable pressure.

“Haah, ugh... ah...”

He sighed, as he repeatedly slid his cock over the aggressive tattoo on Zhenya's chest. Between the tight mounds, the reddened glans appeared and disappeared, throbbing and dripping clear pre-seminal fluid. Zhenya, with a lascivious expression, watched the scene.

Meeting Kwon Taekjoo's gaze, he slowly opened his mouth. Seeing the red, wet interior of his mouth, Kwon Taekjoo's Adam's apple visibly twitched and he began to thrust his cock even deeper. Zhenya, in response, tilted his head down and stuck out his tongue, lightly licking Kwon Taekjoo's glans with each thrust. The intense arousal caused Kwon Taekjoo to frown. He squeezed Zhenya's chest tighter and his hip movements became noticeably fiercer.

Zhenya sucked again and again on Taekjoo's flushed cock. Each time he did so, Kwon Taekjoo's body, mounted on top of him, trembled violently. His eyes, once dark, were now completely consumed by a fiery passion. Kwon Taekjoo was thrusting his hips viciously, like he had completely forgotten about the wound on his leg.

“Ugh, ah, haah, ugh, haah...”

He gritted his teeth as he moved toward climax. In an instant, as he fell out of sync, his cock slipped over Zhenya's chest and plunged straight into his mouth. It hit his uvula immediately, pushing itself deep into his throat, which caused Zhenya to cough slightly. By doing so, this made Zhenya's swollen neck to contract and relax, providing a gentle but intense stimulation. With his body trembling, Kwon Taekjoo was unable to pull his cock back, all the while his head jerked back involuntarily.

“Ughhh...”

His body shuddered from an incredibly intense surge of pleasure. His spine stiffened, as a burning, cold sensation ran through him from head to toe. Instantly, Kwon Taekjoo's cock exploded deep inside Zhenya's mouth, releasing a dense wave of white semen that spread inside his throat. Some of the fluid seemed to have passed into his airway, causing Zhenya to start coughing loudly. Seeing his face completely flushed and his eyes wet brought Taekjoo back to his senses immediately.

“I'm sorry, did I scare you?”

He asked nervously, brushing his fingers over the dampness in Zhenya’s eyes. Zhenya shook his head, nuzzling against Taekjoo’s hand. His damp lashes tickled Taekjoo’s palm. Overcome with an inexplicable emotion, Taekjoo cupped Zhenya’s face and covered it with kisses.

Zhenya, quietly accepting the affection, slid Taekjoo’s briefs down to his knees. Taekjoo quickly grabbed his hand, glancing away with a hint of embarrassment.

"Hey, I don’t remember at all what sex with you was like. Did I take the lead?"

His tone was incredulous, laced with an obvious assumption that he couldn’t possibly have ever been the one underneath. Both were already fully aroused, and there was no point ruining the mood with clarifications. After all, letting the other person believe whatever they wanted wasn’t the worst idea when memories were missing.

“We always took turns.”

Taekjoo nodded at Zhenya’s reply, which wasn’t entirely false but not entirely true either. He seemed reassured, satisfied with the idea of a fair balance, with each taking their turn.

“If you’ve forgotten everything, then I’ll just have to teach you all over again, Taekjoo.”

With a swift motion, Zhenya pushed Kwon Taekjoo onto his back while lying on the bed. He continued to kiss him slowly as he stroked his cock, which had lost its firmness after coming. Kwon Taekjoo exhaled deeply between their entwined lips and let out a suppressed moan. Soon after, Kwon Taekjoo's stiff body began to relax.

While Zhenya kept stroking Kwon Taekjoo's cock, he suddenly turned him upside down. Simultaneously, he tightened his grip on his cock, lifting his hips. Kwon Taekjoo, not understanding what was happening, used his hands to support his own torso, but he flinched, hunching his shoulders. Zhenya had spread his ass cheeks apart and, without hesitation, buried his face between them. When the deepest part of his body felt soaked by a warm wetness, his spine tensed. It was such a strange sensation that he didn't know how to react.

“Ugh, wait...!”

She reached an arm back to pull Zhenya's head away, but Zhenya didn't stop, licking deeply at the cleft with his entire tongue. Each time Zhenya's tongue flicked past, the hidden little

hole shuddered and closed all the way.

“Ugh, ah... I don't like this...”

“You loved it, Taekjoo. Leave it to me.”

Zhenya gently pushed away Kwon Taekjoo's hand that was trying to shove him away and opened his mouth to suck on the skin around his hole as well. He increased the pressure with the tip of his tongue, urging the hole to open. The tight skin around the opening slowly relaxed, causing Taekjoo's fingers and toes to tense up. Though he tried to resist by gritting his teeth, stifled moans kept escaping him.

“Ah, ugh, mmm... that, that's enough...”

He moaned as he shook his head. The more he moaned, the more insistent Zhenya became, scraping the already soft hole with the hard tip of his tongue. Zhenya's warm breath inside his opening made his waist tremble uncontrollably.

His ears, reddened from the intense exertion, flattened repeatedly against the pillow. Zhenya watched Kwon Taekjoo's every reaction and continued to widen the entrance with his tongue.

He also constantly rubbed and stimulated Taekjoo's cock to prevent him from being able to stop him. Kwon Taekjoo completely collapsed at the waves of pleasure coming from all sides.

“Ah, haah, mmm, ahh, ugh, mmm...”

The low moans seemed to melt into his ear. Zhenya's neck, which was rubbing against Kwon Taekjoo's backside, was also vibrating softly. His cock became so hard that it was unable to bend. Zhenya, trying to quench his burning thirst, squeezed Kwon Taekjoo's ass and sucked at the thin skin around the hole voraciously. The sound of the flesh being suctioned echoed constantly in the room.

The cock Zhenya was holding was about to burst from swelling so much. Taekjoo wanted a stronger stimulation in order to finish off quickly. The unrelieved heat buildup was driving him crazy.

“Umm, Zhenya, Zhenya...”

He reached back to grab Zhenya's wrist. Gently tugging on his arm, Zhenya lifted his head. His lips were moist and glistened with saliva. Licking his own lips with his red tongue, he looked at Kwon Taekjoo. The hole, now empty, twitched restlessly, displaying intense frustration.

“Ah, hurry up...”

“Begging already, Taekjoo?”

Zhenya smiled faintly and knelt down. Then, his large cock began to softly rub the cleft of Kwon Taekjoo's ass. The touch of flesh against his hole produced a tingling sensation.

Despite his doubts about whether he could withstand such a size, he swallowed saliva. He desperately wanted to relieve the heat burning within his body, even if it meant getting hurt.

“Zhenya, hurry...”

Zhenya continued to rub his cock against Kwon Taekjoo while keeping an eye on his form. There seemed to be no signs of stiffness or hyperventilation like in Greece.

“Ah, relax.”

Zhenya pressed the back of Kwon Taekjoo's neck while puffing out his abdomen. Kwon Taekjoo closed his eyes tightly and clenched his fists. Finally, Zhenya's cock, which had only been grazing between his ass, was rigidly positioned at his entrance.

With only slight pressure, the skin around the hole slid softly inward. Zhenya's breathing became more ragged. In contrast, Kwon Taekjoo clenched his jaws in preparation for the impending pain, visibly trembling. He looked more like a person about to face torture than to have sex.

Zhenya sighed and took some gel from the nightstand beside the bed. He applied it generously between Taekjoo's ass. As the cold, slippery gel began to slide down his cleft, Kwon Taekjoo tensed his waist in response. The gel slid down his chapped thigh muscles, pooling on the back of his knee.

Zhenya, watching the erotic display, licked his dry lips and began to rub his cock against Kwon Taekjoo. The wet sound of friction between their skins became audible. Kwon Taekjoo was still stiff, not uttering a sound.

Suddenly, Zhenya lay on Kwon Taekjoo's back, resting his warm lips on Taekjoo's nape. He caressed and kissed the skin, then he unexpectedly bit him, filling his mouth with Taekjoo's body scent. The sudden pain made Kwon Taekjoo let out a high-pitched moan. Seizing the moment, he plunged his cock, which had only been at the entrance, all the way in.

“... Aaaah!”

A moan that sounded like a scream came from Kwon Taekjoo. The heavy feeling in his abdomen suddenly intensified, preventing him from breathing properly. Any wrong move felt like it could tear the orifice that had opened wide.

“Ahh, fuck...!”

"You’re still cursing all the time, as usual."

Zhenya, frowning at the tight pressure, smiled with an expression of disbelief. Kwon Taekjoo could barely snap out of his state of shock. Although he was quite used to violence and had great stamina, the pain of penetration was completely overwhelming. It didn't seem like there was anything good compared to conventional sex, he found it amazing that his cock didn't lose its erection in the midst of it all.

Zhenya adjusted his pelvis and rubbed over the areas in touch. Kwon Taekjoo held his breath at the stinging sensation on the inside of his navel. As a result, his nape, neck and even his ears went completely scarlet.

“Taekjoo, you need to breathe.”

Zhenya, smiling briefly, muttered something and without any hesitation sank his head into Kwon Taekjoo's hair. Then Zhenya's cock, which had been filling his belly, slowly slipped out. The feeling of relief, so clear that it left his belly empty, caused the inner walls to twitch. In the next moment, Zhenya's cock plunged in again, mercilessly tearing apart the membrane in his abdomen.

“Aaaah!”

The instant Kwon Taekjoo let out a scream, something began to come out of his cock. Was he peeing?

While worrying, Zhenya continued to fuck him relentlessly.

“Ugh, ugh, aah, haah...!”

“Taekjoo, Taekjoo....”

As if he had lost his mind, Zhenya repeated Kwon Taekjoo's name as he clung to him stubbornly. The sound of his thighs slapping against Kwon Taekjoo's ass was clear and repetitive. Taekjoo's skin was flushing quickly and felt sore. Both the inner walls of his abdomen, where Zhenya's cock was plunging, and his hole that was being scraped by the uneven surface of his cock, burned as if they had been scorched. The mixture of desire to run away from the pain and the urge for it to continue was overwhelming.

Zhenya continued to relentlessly stroke Kwon Taekjoo's ear and neck as he pounded him mercilessly. At one point, Zhenya's cock suddenly touched a sensitive spot. Kwon Taekjoo, who was completely exhausted, reacted violently and shakily.

“Ah, there, ah, there, oh... Hmm!”

“Ah, here? Yes? Ah— uh, Taekjoo...”

Zhenya, still moaning, was crushing Kwon Taekjoo with his body, crushing his most sensitive place. He knew exactly where and how to push and how hard he had to press to bring him pleasure. Of course, Kwon Taekjoo, who had lost all his memory, found the pleasure Zhenya was giving him both disconcerting and terrifying.

Zhenya, keeping Kwon Taekjoo immobilized with his own weight, continued to rotate his cock inside Taekjoo's hole. When he applied steady pressure on a specific area inside Taekjoo, he shook his limbs, not knowing what to do.

“Ha...damn it, dam—.... ahhh! Uh... ahh... ahh... ahh...”

“Do you like it, Taekjoo, yes? When I do this to you, you like it, don't you?”

“Ahh, mmm, ugh! Haah, Zhenya...!”

He desperately called out to Zhenya, as he moved clumsily. Zhenya tenderly kissed Kwon Taekjoo's shoulder, but didn't relent in the speed or depth of his penetration. His cock, completely filling the inner walls, clawed brutally at the mucous membrane every time he pulled out. The intense sensation of pleasure seemed to want to rip his brain out.

Kwon Taekjoo pulled Zhenya's head tightly, bringing him so close that their ears brushed, and their warm breaths mingled. Instinctively, Taekjoo grabbed Zhenya by the hair and buried his face in his cheek. The heaving breaths and the fiery temperature of their bodies seemed to intensify their desire even more, and Zhenya quickened the pace of his thrusts.

The gigantic mattress shook with the speed and brutality of the pounding. Without slowing down for a moment, Zhenya focused on a single spot. The sound of skin sliding continuously echoed. Kwon Taekjoo's eyes glazed over from the shock of pleasure that spread throughout his body. The contradiction between his body trying to push Zhenya away and his hands luring him in was obvious.

Soon, Zhenya threw himself completely on top of him. His cock, plunging deep inside Kwon Taekjoo, throbbed violently. In a flash, everything turned white for Kwon Taekjoo.

“Haah. Haah, haah!”

“Ugh, ahh...!”

Kwon Taekjoo, moaning and writhing, shook wildly. Next, Zhenya, gnashing his teeth, roared. His back, sweaty and slippery, swelled enormously, with every muscle twitching independently.

“Haah, haah...”

After releasing a thick amount of semen inside Kwon Taekjoo, Zhenya continued to thrust inside him for a few more times. His behavior was so stubborn like he was trying to get Taekjoo fully pregnant. An extreme pleasure poured out relentlessly until it made Taekjoo's core tremble.

Kwon Taekjoo, who was trembling uncontrollably, dropped his limbs as he gasped out in short breaths. With just breathing, his lungs burned with indescribable pain. His entire body was covered in cold sweat and shivering, preventing him from even moving a finger.

Zhenya, who was still glued to him, slowly began to pull out. His cock, which had completely filled Kwon Taekjoo's insides, slid out of him slowly. However, just as Zhenya was about to pull out completely, Taekjoo's hole suddenly contracted, trapping him and refusing to let go. Zhenya raised an eyebrow in surprise as he watched the unmoving nape of Kwon Taekjoo.

After a brief break, Taekjoo turned his head slowly to look at him. His cheeks and ears were completely flushed, and his clouded eyes, reflected a newly awakened desire.

“...Hey. Let's do it again.”

Zhenya let out a hearty laugh. It was hardly surprising—until now, Kwon Taekjoo had never taken the initiative to seduce him or ask for more. Zhenya knew from experience that he didn’t need to tease Taekjoo; they always went until he passed out. How bold could someone become after losing their memory?

For a moment, Zhenya’s eyes widened in surprise, but they soon narrowed as he flashed a radiant smile.

"As many times as you want, however you like."

They came together again and again, so many times that their semen, at first thick, became clearer, like a transparent liquid. Kwon Taekjoo's skin, bitten and sucked by Zhenya, was completely marked, without a single untouched area. His wrists, ankles and thighs, which had been gripped tightly, were full of bruises. The searing heat of desire had melted even his ability to think clearly. They were both engulfed in such an overwhelming lust that they had no time to reflect on their situation or their surroundings.

Still, it didn't feel enough. Kwon Taekjoo wanted a stronger stimulation, strong enough to empty his mind completely.

“Haah...haa.... Zhenya ”

Completely knocked down and barely breathing, Kwon Taekjoo suddenly tugged on Zhenya's hand. Zhenya, who until that moment had meekly followed what he wanted, suddenly stopped and stiffened. Kwon Taekjoo had brought his hand around his own neck.

“Haa... huh? Quickly!”

Kwon Taekjoo, unusually impatient, pressed both of Zhenya's hands on his neck. He continued to urge him with whispered “hurry’s” as he tightly squeezed Zhenya's cock that was still inside him. Thick veins appeared on Zhenya's forehead and smoothly chiseled jaw.

Despite that, when Zhenya hesitated to act, Kwon Taekjoo covered Zhenya's hands with his own, pressing them tighter against his own neck. As if that stimulation wasn’t enough, he frowned in frustration, letting out a dissatisfied growl.

In that instant, something inside Zhenya snapped. The next moment, his hands tightened firmly around Kwon Taekjoo's neck. As the pressure increased, Kwon Taekjoo began gasping and choking, his legs sliding uncontrollably against the bed, slipping and scrambling. It was as if every cell in his body shut down at once. Drool dripped down the side of his tightly clenched jaw.

Every time Zhenya squeezed his neck hard, his hole would contract fiercely, squeezing the cock that still filled him. The intensity of the sensation was such that he couldn't stay conscious.

“Taekjoo, Taekjoo...”

Zhenya moaned in a whisper, frowning at the intense feeling. Kwon Taekjoo too, immersed in an overwhelming pleasure, was writhing and panting. However, he wouldn't let go of Zhenya's arms, clinging tightly to make sure he didn't loosen the pressure on his neck.

“Kuh... Uh... Haa... Kuuh...”

“Ha... Uh... Hnngh... Uh...”

The lack of oxygen began to make everything spin. A heavy dizziness swept through his body, from head to toe. The sensation of teetering on the edge of suffocation stirred a strange excitement within him. Suddenly, a shiver ran down his spine, causing his skin to break out in goosebumps. Kwon Taekjoo, in that confused state, unexpectedly began to spurt out a stream of clear liquid. In seconds, Zhenya's abdomen and the sheets were completely soaked.

“Ah, ahhh... ah...”

Kwon Taekjoo trembled as he kept pulling Zhenya closer to him. Zhenya, with his forehead resting against Kwon Taekjoo's, squeezed his neck even harder as he moaned sweetly.

“Haa, uh, Taekjoo...”

Kwon Taekjoo, who was still squirting out a clear fluid, began to gradually calm down. Then, the hand that had been gripping Zhenya also began to loosen. As soon as Kwon Taekjoo's hand fell away, Zhenya snapped back to his senses. Kwon Taekjoo’s eyelids were tightly shut, and tears traced the contours of his long eyes.

“...Taekjoo?”

Alarmed, Zhenya first checked Kwon Taekjoo’s breathing. Though slightly uneven, it was steady enough. He pressed his ear to his chest to confirm his heartbeat. Taekjoo’s heart thudded intensely beneath his skin, the vibration resonating through Zhenya’s ear. Finally, with a wave of relief washing over him, Zhenya rested his forehead on Taekjoo’s shoulder. His previously heated body cooled rapidly, breaking out in a cold sweat.

The hand that had been wrapped around Kwon Taekjoo’s neck remained numb. Even as he clenched his fist tightly on purpose, the faint tremor refused to fade.

“.....”

Zhenya looked down at Kwon Taekjoo, who now slept as if he’d simply lost consciousness. From the moment he’d nearly taken his life with his own hands, Zhenya knew he could never harm him again, not so carelessly. Taekjoo, too, never asked to be strangled again after that day. In fact, he became reluctant to wear ties or scarves around his neck, a silent testament to the trauma that lingered for them both.

The Kwon Taekjoo in Zhenya’s arms wasn’t so different from the one he had known. His scent, his voice, the warmth of his body, his tastes—even the way his tone softened when he was happy—everything was just as before.

But it wasn't entirely the same. Kwon Taekjoo still didn't remember the misfortunes they had shared or the memories that had bound them together. He was merely doing his best to accept the idea that Zhenya was his lover.

Isn't that enough? Zhenya thought. As long as Taekjoo didn't leave him behind, as long as he stayed. It didn't matter if he never remembered the past or if it stayed lost forever. What mattered was dedicating time and effort to make Taekjoo fall for him again. That was enough.

So why?

Why, even while spending precious time with this unusually kind and tender Kwon Taekjoo, did Zhenya feel so unsettled? It was as if something was slipping away, something vital. A deep, unreachable emptiness swelled inside him, and though he couldn't pinpoint what was leaking through that hollow space, the uncertainty fed the unease, allowing it to grow.

The indescribable sense of loss carved a gaping hole in the center of Zhenya's chest. Clinging to Kwon Taekjoo tightly, he tried to shake off the unpleasant sensation. He pressed his face into Taekjoo's chest, holding him firmly in place, as though anchoring himself to something solid. He didn't know any other way to fend off the overwhelming restlessness threatening to consume him.

He woke briefly, stirred by the sensation of someone tugging at him. The grip was familiar, as was the strength in the hand. A faint smile crossed his lips as he blinked his eyes open. As he expected, Kwon Taekjoo was holding his hand, leading him somewhere. Without hesitation, he followed, silently letting Taekjoo take him wherever he wanted to go.

Kwon Taekjoo walked ahead without uttering a word. Not once did he turn back to look at Zhenya. Hoping to catch his attention, Zhenya gave his hand a gentle tug, but it was no use.

"Hey, Taekjoo. Where are we going?"

He stopped walking and asked. But Kwon Taekjoo didn't respond, nor did he look back. As the distance between them grew, Zhenya's hand slipped from his grasp. He reached out again, trying to grab hold of him, but his fingers only brushed the edge of Taekjoo's.

"Taekjoo?"

Stretching his arms desperately, he tried to close the gap, but Taekjoo kept moving forward, steadily pulling away. Zhenya's legs refused to cooperate. It felt as if invisible hands were gripping his limbs, holding him back. Glancing down, he saw he was already buried ankle-deep in thick, heavy snow. Forcing himself to move, he took another step, but the snow swallowed him up to his knees, then his thighs.

Panicking, he lifted his gaze. Kwon Taekjoo, oblivious to his struggle, kept walking ahead. Unlike Zhenya, he glided effortlessly over a smooth sheet of ice.

“Taekjoo!” Zhenya called out, his voice breaking into a desperate cry. The echo of his shout reverberated back at him, but Taekjoo didn’t stop, didn’t turn.

Zhenya fought against the snow, which now loomed like a towering wall around him. With each step, the drifts rose higher, engulfing him to his chest, then to his neck.

It was dangerous. Maybe he should stop.

But even then, he forced himself forward, one more step toward Taekjoo, who continued to drift further away without hesitation. In that moment, the world seemed to collapse around him. His entire body was abruptly pulled into a gaping void, a suffocating silence blanketing everything in blinding white.

".....?"

He woke up to the sight of a familiar ceiling. It was the room in the mansion. Had he been dreaming? Zhenya rarely dreamed, whether pleasant dreams or nightmares, so the experience felt oddly disconcerting. What had the dream been about?

As he tried to recall, he noticed an absence—his arms felt empty. Kwon Taekjoo wasn’t there. Reflexively, he tried to sit up, but his movement was abruptly halted. His limbs didn’t respond as they should. He pulled harder and heard a metallic clinking sound. His other arm was dragged back with the force. Looking down, he realized his wrists and ankles were bound to the bed with chains.

What the hell is going on?

Glancing further, he saw Kwon Taekjoo seated on a chair at the foot of the bed, watching him. He wasn’t restrained. Yet, instead of attempting to free Zhenya, Taekjoo sat still, observing him with a detached, almost clinical gaze.

“Taekjoo?”

Zhenya's voice carried confusion as he called out. The response was a chilling indifference. The furrowed brows he instinctively wore deepened further; something was terribly wrong. Kwon Taekjoo’s demeanor had shifted completely since last night. That icy, distant stare was foreign, alien.

For a fleeting moment, Zhenya considered the possibility that this was still a dream, but the cold bite of the metal against his skin was all too real. A gnawing sense of dread settled in his chest.

“What is this? Come on, this isn’t funny.”

“I remember everything.”

“What?”

His heartbeat quickened, thundering erratically. Kwon Taekjoo's dark eyes bore into him, their depths unfathomable.

Before Zhenya could process the weight of his words, another sentence fell like a guillotine's blade.

"I remember everything you did to me."

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END OF VOLUME 9

Chapter End Notes

Support the author by purchasing the novel on Ridibooks.

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[1]: The word Taekjoo used to describe Zhenya here is "애교" (aegyo), which refers to a display of charm or cuteness and is commonly associated with making adorable facial expressions. I think it suits Zhenya extremely well!

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I can't believe we're almost at the end of this emotional rollercoaster of a novel! Just one volume left—only three chapters to go! I thought about splitting the chapters in half to make them easier to read, but that will depend on how long they end up being once the translation is done.

Thank you all so much for your support! And don't worry—they do get a happy ending, even if it doesn't seem like it right now.

Return To Zero

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VOLUME 10

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"I remember everything you did to me."

Kwon Taekjoo's eyes narrowed, sharp with hatred. A clear hostility burned in his dark gaze, erecting an invisible wall between them. Zhenya felt the chasm widening, suffocating the air in his lungs. Everything had spiraled out of control, yet he didn't know where to begin to set things right. The dramatic shift overnight was staggering. In that moment, his only thought was that he needed to hold on to Taekjoo before he slipped away again.

He tried to get up, but his arms and legs were tightly restrained, preventing any movement. Normally, he would have easily broken free, but now, dizziness clouded his mind, and his body felt weak. A quick glance around the room revealed a syringe on the nearby table. It appeared he had been sedated while unconscious. This wouldn't have happened if he hadn't let his guard down with Taekjoo.

"Taekjoo, untie me."

Zhenya demanded, striving to keep his voice steady. But Taekjoo ignored him, his anger pouring forth unchecked.

"What were you planning to do? Even if I had lost my memory, why deceive me so cruelly? Did you think I'd never find out? Do you take me for a complete fool?"

"Taekjoo..."

“Every time I remember the past, I feel sick. It’s revolting—how you toyed with me, how I nearly died at your hands, how I ended up your victim all over again. Back then, I thought it’d be better to just die. And now, you expect me to believe we’re lovers? That I accepted you willingly? Or was it just me surrendering to your threats?”

“I told you, untie me.”

Zhenya said, trying to keep his composure. Taekjoo sneered, mockery dripping from his voice.

“Oh, so you’re ordering me around again?”

“Hah... Offended, are we? Why should you be? You had no problem mocking me when you pretended to be my lover. You betrayed me, raped me, left me half-dead on the frozen riverbank. You didn’t care if I lived or died. Those memories are still fresh, like they happened yesterday. And now you act offended, as if it’s all in the past?”

Zhenya fell silent. Every word Taekjoo spoke was true. In the past, they had been enemies. Back then, Taekjoo had been nothing more than another thief trying to steal "Anastasia."

Zhenya’s feelings for him had been fleeting curiosity at best. Whether Taekjoo lived or died hadn’t mattered to him. He had simply found amusement in watching him struggle to survive. It had been entertaining to the point that Zhenya hadn’t even noticed the real danger Taekjoo was facing.

If Zhenya had killed Taekjoo, no one would have cared—not the Kremlin, not even Korea, the country that had sent him. Zhenya could have destroyed him like any other invader, yet for some reason, he had spared him.

It could have ended as just another passing story if Taekjoo hadn’t returned. But against all odds, he did return—always to counterattack—and once again, he captured Zhenya’s attention. Inevitably, and without intention or purpose, Zhenya found himself drawn to him.

“You raped me again without remorse, locked me up, and then tried to strangle me because I wanted to escape. Is that why you hesitated yesterday? Were you afraid I’d remember? That your pathetic game would be exposed?”

Taekjoo’s voice was laced with rage, his accusations like daggers. His face twisted with fury, as if his mind were unraveling beneath the weight of his anger.

Zhenya knew he had to explain, to clear up the misunderstandings that plagued Taekjoo. Everything Taekjoo remembered now were acts committed in the past—before Zhenya understood his own feelings, before they had become lovers. Taekjoo himself had once agreed not to run anymore. Perhaps his recovered memories hadn’t yet reached that point.

“...Is that all you remember?”

“What else is there to remember? How much more of your hell did I survive?”

Zhenya stayed quiet.

“Hah... After losing my memory, I wondered how I could ever have been involved with someone like you. Remembering all those revolting moments, I finally understand.”

Taekjoo paused, shaking his head as if he’d solved a tormenting puzzle.

“I gave up.”

“What?”

“I got tired of running. I accepted you because I had no other choice. No matter where I went, you’d find me. And I had people I wanted to protect.”

Taekjoo admitted that he stayed with Zhenya only because he felt cornered. It wasn’t out of love or desire—just sheer necessity.

“Wherever I went, you would chase me. I was exhausted. To stop the pursuit, I had to accept reality. That’s why I stayed. I told myself I wouldn’t be happy, but maybe I could at least turn a beast into a man.”

He said it to hurt him, but Zhenya didn’t care. Even if Taekjoo had stayed unwillingly, even if it was under duress, it didn’t change Zhenya’s feelings for him.

“Even so, you chose me, Taekjoo.”

“Chose you? Is it really a choice when there are no other options?”

“...”

“Tell me, was there ever a moment when I showed you affection first?”

“Innumerable times.”

It was the one question Zhenya could answer with confidence. Even if Taekjoo had stayed unwillingly, their relationship had evolved into that of lovers, just like any other couple.

Whenever Taekjoo returned from his missions abroad, guilt followed him, and he always came back to Ajinoki. When passion took hold, he initiated intimacy himself. He grew angry when Zhenya disappeared for days without warning. He even grew jealous at the thought of Zhenya being promised to someone else.

But still, Taekjoo tried to deny it all.

“Don’t you think it was just your imagination?”

“Imagination?”

Zhenya frowned. Taekjoo’s aggression seemed rooted in a belief that their love couldn’t be real because of their twisted history.

“Did I ever say ‘I love you’?”

No, Taekjoo had never said those words. But then again, neither had Zhenya. Love, a concept so vital to others, had never seemed important to him. He simply wanted Taekjoo—wanted to be by his side.

Zhenya didn't respond, and Taekjoo rushed to a conclusion.

"See? There was nothing."

Zhenya felt his anger rise. He couldn't bear to see Taekjoo dismiss everything as if it had never happened.

"If you're so sure it wasn't real, then shoot me. That will settle it once and for all."

Taekjoo stood abruptly. He strode over to the bed and, without hesitation, pressed the barrel of a gun against Zhenya's forehead. Zhenya didn't resist. He met Taekjoo's eyes with a calm, unyielding gaze.

Taekjoo's hand trembled as he tightened his grip on the trigger, but at the last moment, he pulled the gun away.

"Even if I wanted you, it was because I'd lost my mind. The situation was abnormal—I was under too much pressure, and my mind couldn't take it. Anyone would have sought comfort, no matter who it was."

In their isolated world, with no one else to turn to, had they been drawn to each other solely because of their circumstances?

It didn't matter now. What mattered was that the past was real—it had happened. But Taekjoo was acting as if it could be erased.

Zhenya clenched his jaw, his icy blue eyes hardening. His fingers curled into fists, the chains biting into his skin.

"Taekjoo, untie me."

"You're showing your true colors now. That's who you are—a psychopath. Did you always threaten me like this? Using my mother's safety to control me?"

"You're making up stories."

"If I'm wrong, then explain it to me."

"Would you even listen?"

Zhenya glared at him, but Taekjoo just raked a hand through his hair and turned away. After a moment, he holstered the gun and said calmly.

"I'm leaving."

"You think I'll let you?"

Taekjoo smirked at Zhenya's defiance.

"I don't need your permission. This time, it's on my terms."

Zhenya pulled at his restraints, but Taekjoo ignored him, opening a drawer to retrieve a set of helicopter keys.

"You're running away again?"

"Back to the beginning."

Taekjoo replied coldly, walking out of the room without hesitation.

"Taekjoo!"

Zhenya screamed after him, thrashing violently against the chains, but his drugged body betrayed him. Outside, the sound of helicopter blades filled the air, the vibrations rattling the windows.

From the window, Zhenya watched as the helicopter lifted off, disappearing into the sky.

"Taekjoooooo!"

But his desperate cry never reached Kwon Taekjoo. It only echoed off the walls and vanished into the void.

When the front door opened, shattering the silence, the motion-activated light flickered on. Back in familiar surroundings, Taekjoo felt his already weary body grow even heavier. With some effort, he slipped off his shoes and stepped inside. His mother had been away for quite some time, and it was Taekjoo's first time returning home in months, leaving the house shrouded in absolute silence. Even the floor felt cold.

He made his way to the living room sofa with difficulty, collapsing onto it. A cloud of dust rose into the air, making him cough. Raising a hand, he covered his eyes as a long sigh escaped his chest.

After escaping Ajinoki, he had been placed under protective custody and received assistance at a local support center. Crossing the border from Russia into China had gone surprisingly smoothly—no pursuers, no threats. Against all odds, the entire escape had been uneventful.

When he arrived at Incheon Port, Yoon Jongwoo was there to greet him. The moment Jongwoo saw Taekjoo, emotion overwhelmed him. He ran toward him and embraced him tightly.

"Sunbae!"

"Hey, man… That's gross."

"Are you okay? Where have you been all this time? Did something happen to you?"

“No problems at all. Were you worried?”

“Of course I was worried!”

“I’m not someone who dies easily. You’re still too young to worry like an old man.”

Taekjoo carelessly ruffled Jongwoo’s hair, making it stick up like it was ready to explode. Jongwoo yelped in pain, and, as usual, Taekjoo scolded him for being overly dramatic before giving him a light kick in the rear.

“Let’s go home. I’m tired.”

“Oh, if I go bald, it’ll be your fault, Sunbae. You know that, right?”

“Even if you go bald, it’ll be genetics, not me.”

“What? Are you insulting my dad now?”

“Come on, your dad’s charismatic enough. It won’t ruin him.”

After exchanging jabs, they climbed into Jongwoo’s car. Jongwoo explained that headquarters had approved Taekjoo to rest at home for now. When asked when he’d returned to Korea, Jongwoo said it was right after Taekjoo and Zhenya had disappeared, adding that he’d already reported Taekjoo’s return and survival to the leadership.

Taekjoo stared silently out the window. The familiar scenery he had seen for over 30 years now felt strangely foreign. Lowering the window, he let the wind brush against his face. Noticing this, Jongwoo slowed the car. The temperature, the humidity, and the faint scent of Korea stirred a mix of deep relief and odd nostalgia within him. It felt as though he had returned from an impossibly long journey.

They soon arrived at Taekjoo’s home. Jongwoo handed him a pre-bought bone broth soup and insisted:

“Get some rest today. Don’t think about anything. If you need to go to the hospital, call me. I’ll take you.”

“You still think I’m sick? As you can see, I’m perfectly fine now.”

Just as he was about to step out of the car, Taekjoo suddenly froze. Jongwoo stared at him in surprise. After a moment of silence, Taekjoo confessed:

“Jongwoo. I remember everything.”

“What?”

“Everything. Why I went to Russia, what happened there, what Director Lim wanted to do to me. I remember it all.”

“Oh.”

Jongwoo faltered, unsure how to respond, fearful that these memories might reopen old wounds. Sensing his anxiety, Taekjoo gripped Jongwoo's pale neck and massaged it firmly. Jongwoo's face flushed pink immediately.

"I was just saying. Why are you reacting like that?"

"...Sunbae, are you sure you're okay?"

"What could possibly be wrong with me? It's all in the past. Or did you do something wrong? Is that why you're trembling in advance?"

"Absolutely not! I've always been the victim."

"It's fine. Just leave."

When Jongwoo tried to follow him out, Taekjoo waved him off. Jongwoo hesitated, watching him with worry, but only turned back after Taekjoo tapped the car, signaling for him to go. He reluctantly drove away, promising to meet again soon.

Taekjoo lingered outside for a moment, watching him leave, then stepped inside.

As he slowly ran a hand over his face, he couldn't ignore how empty and quiet the house felt. It seemed especially large and lonely without his mother. Lying down and doing nothing only brought a flood of thoughts. He tried to suppress them, but they overwhelmed him.

Memories of his last day in Ajinoki returned with brutal clarity. After passing out from exhaustion following a prolonged encounter, fragments of his forgotten memories had surfaced, unbidden, like wildfire in his mind.

The operation in Busan to capture North Korean agents, the joint mission with Russia and North Korea to locate Anastasia—everything that had led him to Russia replayed vividly. He remembered how everything went wrong the moment he landed in Moscow: the abduction, meeting Zhenya under false pretenses orchestrated by distorted intel from headquarters, and the savage betrayal that followed. Zhenya had tormented him relentlessly until he grew bored.

That night, those memories had returned so violently that his head felt like it would split open. He writhed on the floor, nausea gripping him. The thought that he had shared intimacy with someone he should have destroyed filled him with unbearable disgust. Watching Zhenya's peaceful face as he slept beside him made Taekjoo's insides churn. How had they ever been lovers? It felt like the entire world was mocking him.

The memory alone made him retch. He felt as though insects crawled under his skin, through the veins Zhenya had once touched.

"Damn it..."

Suppressing his nausea with difficulty, he hurled a pillow across the room. Even after deep, measured breaths, his ragged breathing and roiling stomach wouldn't settle. Bolting to his

feet, he rushed to the bathroom. Leaning over the toilet, he heaved until only bitter bile came out.

Gripping his head in frustration, the faint scent of Zhenya suddenly filled his nostrils. He shuddered, looking around. The house remained silent, empty. Could it have been his imagination?

Sniffing his own skin, he was horrified to think Zhenya's scent might have seeped into him.

"...Damn it. Damn it."

Taekjoo tore off his clothes as if they were burning him and darted into the shower, scrubbing furiously to erase every trace of Zhenya.

At some point, exhaustion took over, leaving him sprawled and aching. His lower back throbbed, and his head pulsed with pain. He had no idea how much time had passed. After numerous bouts of retching, hunger was a distant memory. Fighting against the inertia, he dragged himself to his feet, staring blankly at the ceiling.

He entered his room, opened the desk drawer, and retrieved his personal phone. It had been dead for some time, so he plugged it in to charge. When the battery reached 1%, he powered it on. Notifications of missed calls flooded the screen—most from his mother. She must have been worried. He pressed the call button, and the familiar ringing was soon replaced by her voice.

"Taekjoo?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Where are you?"

"At home. I finished work and came back to rest."

His mother believed he had been on a lengthy business trip to Russia, so he lied without elaborating. Her voice carried relief that her son was finally home.

"I'm glad to hear that. You're not sick, are you?"

"No."

"Have you eaten?"

"I'm not a child. Of course, I've eaten."

"If I were there, I'd make you some hot soup."

"I told you; I've eaten. How are you? Are you doing well?"

"Yes. Your aunt's stable now, so I'll be back soon."

Her voice was calm, despite Taekjoo's long absence. Likely, Jongwoo and Zhenya had been reassuring her in his stead. But at the mention of Zhenya, her next question caught him off guard.

"Has the ambassador returned with you? I haven't been able to reach him."

"Uh... no, he still has matters to attend to over there."

"Oh, I see. Are you sure they let him stay behind alone?"

"Yes. His business isn't my concern."

"I hope nothing happened to him."

"Mom, don't worry about him. He's a stranger to us."

"What do you mean, a stranger?"

"Well, we're not related by blood or anything. He's just a stranger."

"I don't know why you're being so cold. We've spent so much time with him these past years—holidays, birthdays. I almost consider him family."

"What kind of family?"

Her worry deepened. "If his assistant treats him this way, who can the ambassador rely on? I hope this doesn't mean he's not coming back. Ambassadorial terms usually last around two years, and with everything that's happened in Russia lately, there are bound to be major personnel changes."

For his mother, Zhenya was the boss of her only son. Her desire to please him was a familiar part of her nurturing, as it had been throughout her life. Of course, they had managed to develop a closer relationship during Zhenya's time in Korea, but she certainly had no idea that Zhenya was her son's lover—or the torment he had caused.

"I'm... still not sure."

"If he ends up leaving, tell him to stop by for a farewell visit. You should thank him for everything, even if you won't see each other again."

His mother continued. Taekjoo muttered begrudgingly, "Yes, okay." He was immediately met with a light scolding.

"Could you at least not respond so slowly to things?"

"I get it, I get it. Mom, take a break. I'll call you later."

"I will. And don't forget to eat."

"Yes, yes."

He ended the call quickly. Realizing how much his mother sympathized with Zhenya made Taekjoo uneasy. Even though Zhenya had hurt him deeply, and Taekjoo had just delivered the punishment he believed was deserved, he still felt like the villain.

He wondered if Zhenya had freed himself from the restraints. His strength must have been drained, but could a monster like that stay tied up for days? Taekjoo began to feel an unjustified pity, only to grow angry with himself. Irritated, he ruffled his hair.

“To hell with him! Who cares?”

As his indignant breathing subsided, silence filled the house once more. Rubbing his face in frustration, he glanced at his phone again, hoping to find something to help piece together his fragmented memories.

He suddenly noticed that his gallery was consuming a significant amount of storage. Eyeing it suspiciously, he opened the images.

“What the hell is this?”

He immediately frowned—and for good reason. The folder contained thousands of photos and dozens of videos. None of them were downloads; they were all original snapshots.

Taking a deep breath, Taekjoo started scrolling through the images. The first photo was so blurry he couldn’t make out what it depicted. It was clear the camera had been jostled heavily when the picture was taken. Confused, he kept scrolling. Suddenly, Zhenya’s face appeared on the screen. Taekjoo tensed and quickly swiped to the next image.

Zhenya’s face receded little by little until his peacefully sleeping visage filled the frame. The camera seemed to have been set to continuous shooting mode. Taekjoo couldn’t understand why anyone would take so many photos of a sleeping man.

He kept scrolling. The next photo was just as incomprehensible: something resembling a bathroom ceiling or a drain hole in the floor. A few more swipes, and once again, Zhenya’s face stared back at him.

“God, that’s creepy.”

Taekjoo nearly dropped the phone. Clutching his pounding heart, he glanced at the screen again. Zhenya’s lips were smeared with a creamy white substance. Hesitantly, Taekjoo flipped through a few more photos. In the subsequent images, Zhenya’s lips were distant again, and Taekjoo appeared in the frame, reflected in a mirror, holding the phone and smiling. He seemed amused by Zhenya’s disheveled hair.

The last photos, taken in the same location and time, showed Zhenya’s back, naked, as he brushed his teeth.

Each photo session started in the same way. The images were saved in reverse order, meaning each session ended in a similar fashion. It was clear that Zhenya, upon realizing Taekjoo was secretly taking pictures, would react in some way. It felt like they were shooting a movie, a

thought that made Taekjoo shudder with disgust. He couldn't believe he had ever behaved so foolishly in a relationship. His memories suggested that his past relationships had been mature and reserved. Why had things been so different with this man?

Taekjoo wondered if digging into the past would only lead to more disappointment.

While debating whether to stop, he decided to continue—to understand how he had ended up in such an intimate relationship with someone he now considered an enemy. With a sigh, he delved further into the remnants of their past.

As he examined the photos, a pattern emerged. Most of the pictures were taken while Zhenya was asleep or preoccupied—cooking ramen with nail marks on his broad white back, showering, or swimming in a pool. It seemed all these photos had been taken by Taekjoo in secret. Neither of them enjoyed being photographed, so why had Taekjoo filled an entire gallery with pictures of Zhenya?

"Oh, there's a video too," he muttered, playing one of the clips.

The video showed Zhenya swimming in a large pool. Taekjoo appeared to be lounging on a deck chair, watching him. At the edge of the frame, his feet and a beer bottle confirmed his presence.

Zhenya swam to the pool's edge, water droplets and the tattoo on his chest catching the light. The screen wobbled briefly, followed by a faint rustling sound and Taekjoo's muffled voice.

"Ouch!"

He yelped suddenly, fumbling to stop the video but nervously missing the button several times.

"That's enough."

"When are you going to stop watching?"

"I'm exhausted. I can't even lift a finger."

"You're weak."

"It's all your fault! All your fault, okay?"

In the video, Taekjoo jokingly kicked Zhenya's shoulder, but Zhenya, smiling, grabbed his ankle and bit into his calf, only to pull Taekjoo under the water like a crocodile. Taekjoo slipped and began to fall.

"Hey, stop! Stop! Ah, the phone!"

The video ended abruptly as the camera plunged into the water, followed by a dull thud—likely the moment Taekjoo flung the phone in an attempt to save it. That must have been how the phone got that small dent in the corner.

“So that’s what happened?” Taekjoo muttered irritably, scrolling past the video.

A few minutes later, a photo of Zhenya drinking water appeared on the screen. Taekjoo wondered why he had taken that picture. Scrutinizing it, he tried to understand his past motives. The scene clearly took place in a restaurant—the table and food looked familiar. Probably their favorite seafood spot.

He focused on Zhenya. The man, sipping water, looked calm. His nose, the skin beneath his eyes, and his ears were slightly flushed. Had he eaten something spicy? It didn’t make sense for them to have gone there together; if his mother had been with them, she wouldn’t have forced Zhenya to eat spicy seafood.

Taekjoo pushed his memory. Slowly, a clear recollection began to surface. It was the day they had gone to the restaurant to celebrate his mother’s birthday. She loved seafood, so choosing the venue had been easy.

Inviting Zhenya to dinner hadn’t been part of Taekjoo’s plan. But when he returned from work, Zhenya was already at home, greeting him alongside his mother.

“Well, since the ambassador is here, should we just have dinner at home? I can whip up some rice and soup quickly.”

“Who cooks for themselves on their birthday? I’m hungry too—I can’t wait. You’re hungry too, right, Ambassador?”

Taekjoo nudged Zhenya under the table, signaling him to agree. Zhenya, clueless, nodded silently, unwittingly supporting his mother. Only then did she reluctantly agree not to cook dinner herself. And so, Zhenya found himself sharing a table with Taekjoo and his mother.

“Ambassador, there’s probably nothing on this menu you’d want to eat. Should we go somewhere else?”

“Mom, it’s your birthday. You should choose what you want. What’ll it be? Seafood or soup?”

His mother anxiously scanned the menu on the wall. Though the options wouldn’t change, she deliberated between seafood and soup. Meanwhile, the server brought water and appetizers, then asked for their order.

“If we get mild seafood, will it be okay for children?”

His mother asked. It was an unusual question for their family. Taekjoo and his older brother had been eating kimchi stew with rice since they were seven—true Korean kids. The server glanced at the three adults at the table, confused about the mention of “children.” After a slight pause, he replied.

“Seafood might seem spicy for kids. Even the mild dishes are as spicy as hot ramen. If it’s less spicy, it’ll lose flavor.”

If the regular spice level was akin to spicy ramen, then the mild version would be like a light soup. Either way, it was torture for Zhenya.

“Well, it’s not going to work either way. Just order medium seafood, regular spice, and a kid’s schnitzel.”

“Medium seafood, regular spice, and a kid’s schnitzel, right?”

The server confirmed. Taekjoo nodded while his mother anxiously watched him.

“The ambassador came to wish me a happy birthday, and I’m giving him schnitzel. How embarrassing.”

“Don’t worry. He’ll eat it just fine.”

"How could he? Even if he doesn’t speak Korean well and is younger than you, he’s still your boss! How many times have I told you not to act like this around your superiors?"

"Okay, okay, I get it."

Still, his mother wasn’t about to let it go and continued her reprimand until the dishes arrived. Taekjoo, defiant, used both hands to dramatically place the schnitzel in front of Zhenya.

"Mr. Ambassador, here’s your schnitzel. Enjoy it—take your time and chew it well."

He even bowed as if serving an honored superior. Zhenya, with a faint smile, nodded at Taekjoo’s mother as she offered him some side dishes. Quietly, he picked up the fork and knife, cutting a small piece of the schnitzel with meticulous care, almost like he was savoring a high-end steak at a fine-dining restaurant.

"Do you like it, Mr. Ambassador?"

"It’s quite good."

Zhenya replied, narrowing his eyes slightly. It was the kind of question Taekjoo’s mother always asked at meals, and Zhenya seemed to have picked up on it without needing a translation. She watched him eat with visible relief.

Kwon Taekjoo shook his head and served some seafood stew onto his mother’s plate before helping himself. He dug in enthusiastically, relishing the flavors, until he felt someone staring at him. Glancing up, he caught Zhenya watching him with a mix of fascination and confusion as Taekjoo messily picked apart the seafood with sauce-covered fingers. Then Zhenya turned his gaze to Taekjoo’s mother, who was eating delicately with chopsticks, her every move careful and precise. Zhenya seemed puzzled by the contrast, as if wondering how such a "barbaric" approach to seafood could coexist with her grace.

Taekjoo licked his fingers noisily and wiped them on a damp napkin. Then, with chopsticks, he carefully separated a piece of white fish from the sauce.

"This part isn’t spicy. Want to try?"

He asked, offering a piece on Zhenya's fork. Zhenya eyed the fish skeptically but reluctantly brought it to his mouth.

"How was it? Tasty, right?"

"Hmm... better than it looks."

Zhenya admitted, chewing slowly. His mother, visibly relieved that everything was going smoothly, resumed her meal. Taekjoo felt a twinge of satisfaction seeing Zhenya try something new from Korean cuisine.

"Want me to cut you some more?"

"No need."

Zhenya replied, lowering his eyes as he finished the bite. He returned to his schnitzel, slicing it neatly and quietly.

"Oh, the bell… I'll have to step out for a moment. Mr. Ambassador, please take your time and enjoy."

Taekjoo's mother said, excusing herself as she left the table. Taekjoo noticed Zhenya's movements growing restless. He was chewing through the schnitzel quickly, as if trying to finish something unpleasant. Dissatisfied, he moved on to the untouched salad, tossing it nervously before eating. His ears turned bright red, betraying his discomfort.

"Oh, come on, can't handle it? This is too much for you? You're worse than a high schooler!"

Taekjoo teased, filling Zhenya's glass with water. But just as Zhenya reached for it, Taekjoo hesitated, deciding to mess with him. Smirking, he pulled the glass away.

"Say 'please' *and I'll give it to you."*

"What does that mean?"

This moment had been captured in a video. In it, Zhenya looked from the water glass to Taekjoo, his reddened, slightly swollen lips caught in indecision.

"Come on, say 'please.' *Or maybe you don't want it that badly?"*

Taekjoo teased, shaking the glass in front of him. His laughter, loud and clear, made the camera tremble. Zhenya frowned and pulled out his phone, presumably to look up the phrase in a translator. However, the translation didn't convey the playful demand and instead offered the straightforward meaning.

"Uh… 'please'?" Zhenya repeated uncertainly.

"That's it."

Taekjoo replied, still laughing as he handed over the glass. Zhenya quickly grabbed it, gulping down the water to quell the heat in his mouth. In the video, Taekjoo gently wiped the corners of Zhenya's lips with a damp napkin, and the tension in Zhenya's face gradually softened.

"There you go. You really are worse than a high schooler."

Taekjoo muttered, ending the video with a quiet chuckle.

"What the hell was that?!" Taekjoo exclaimed, running a hand through his hair in disbelief.

People say love makes you act immature, but Taekjoo had always thought that didn't apply to him. After all, he'd dated older and independent partners before.

He rarely paid as much attention to his past lovers as he did to Zhenya. Reflecting on it now, even the independent individuals he dated grew tired of his lack of interest and ended things. This realization struck him with clarity—how indifferent and selfish he had been in love.

Kwon Taekjoo scrolled through the photos and videos stored on his phone. Each memory made him wrinkle his nose or shudder in discomfort, yet he couldn't bring himself to stop.

Eventually, he reached photos from the previous year. One image showed his mother and Zhenya, side by side, their backs to the camera. Judging by the prepared ingredients visible in the kitchen, it was taken during one of their family gatherings. In the picture, his mother was offering Zhenya a freshly prepared dish, which he accepted with a cheerful smile and a polite nod. The scene felt like a picture-perfect family moment.

Kwon Taekjoo scratched his head and continued flipping through the photos. The snapshots from their vacations together seemed endless.

He exited the gallery and checked his call log. Only three names appeared: his mother, Yoon Jongwoo, and Zhenya. Among them, Zhenya's name stood out overwhelmingly. There were even instances where he had called Zhenya multiple times in the span of a single minute, as if unable to bear waiting for a reply.

It was evident—Zhenya had firmly embedded himself in Taekjoo's life. The past two years couldn't be explained without him. Every photo and piece of data on Taekjoo's phone bore witness to that.

Yet, despite everything, Zhenya remained an enigma in his memories. Taekjoo couldn't understand what had prompted him to let this man into his life. What quality had broken through the carefully built walls around his heart?

"...Is that all you remember?"

Suddenly, Zhenya's face flashed in his mind—chained to the bed, his expression hopeless. The morning after, Taekjoo's cold demeanor had left Zhenya looking like his world had crumbled.

"Are you going to leave me again, like you did before?"

Zhenya had asked back then. What had he meant by “again”? When had Taekjoo already abandoned him?

Zhenya’s voice echoed in his head, calling out desperately.

“Taekjooooo!”

Kwon Taekjoo tried to shake the memories away, but Zhenya’s face only grew clearer in his mind.

“Damn it, I don’t know!”

He shouted, tossing his phone aside and heading to the kitchen. The only thing he’d done for days was sleep, and now hunger was gnawing at him, demanding attention.

Opening the refrigerator, he found it stocked with homemade meals from his mother. Taekjoo grabbed a container of anchovies and ate a portion. His mother would’ve scolded him for this, but with no one home, he could relax. Fortunately, the food was still fresh.

He pulled out a few more containers and began searching for a pack of rice. Opening a cupboard, he spotted the familiar dishes. After his father and brother left, it had just been him and his mother, and the kitchenware was suited for two.

However, among the usual pairs of plates and bowls, he noticed some unfamiliar ones. Their color was different from the main set, and there was a large fork—too big to be his or his mother’s. Could it really be Zhenya’s?

In his mind, he pictured Zhenya carefully stabbing food with a fork. The one in the cupboard seemed just right for his large hands. The rose engraved on the handle was clearly a choice his mother had made.

How had his mother felt when buying new dishes for Zhenya, the blue-eyed intruder? She must have been happy. But to what extent had Zhenya rooted himself in their lives, and could he ever be uprooted?

“Ha-ah…”

Taekjoo sighed, placing the fork back in the drawer and shutting it. At that moment, memories of Zhenya felt so vivid, as if everything had happened just yesterday. He didn’t have the energy to delve deeper into their relationship. There was no certainty that his memories would fully return, nor that the bitterness would fade when they did. For now, what mattered was regaining his inner balance. Everything else could wait.

Taekjoo showered early in the morning and shaved. He pulled a clean shirt and a well-pressed suit from the closet, put them on, laced up his polished shoes, and stepped out of the house. In the elevator mirror, his reflection was as impeccable as ever.

He got into his car, which had been parked in the underground lot for ages. Taekjoo worried it wouldn’t start, but luckily the battery hadn’t died. Though the car was covered in dust inside and out, he decided to wash it later.

Driving out of the lot, he headed down a familiar road. In the rearview mirror, his eyes reflected determination. Soon, a white building loomed ahead—the National Intelligence Service headquarters.

At the entrance, security cameras scanned the car and driver, matching them to the registered data, and the barrier lifted. It seemed the system hadn't yet processed his official status as "killed in action."

He drove smoothly into the underground parking lot and found an open space. Walking to the elevator, Taekjoo glanced at the spot where Director Lim used to park. A different, unfamiliar car now occupied it, confirming once again that the memories he wanted to forget were, in fact, real.

Taekjoo tightened his lips and looked ahead. Swiping his access card at the reader, he unlocked the door and entered.

The building's layout and appearance hadn't changed much since he was last there. Only a few department names and office arrangements were slightly different. Even so, he felt a bit lost trying to find the new department Yoon Jongwoo had mentioned.

Finally, he stopped in front of a door labeled "Director of Foreign Intelligence." He knocked and heard a voice granting him permission to enter. Opening the door, he saw the director's secretary rise in surprise at the unexpected visitor.

"How can I help you?" the secretary asked.

"I'd like to see the director. Is he available?"

"Yes, one moment, please," the secretary replied, disappearing into the director's office. A moment later, a voice from behind the door—Director Kwak Young-han—called out, unfamiliar to Taekjoo.

The secretary returned, opened the door, and gestured for him to enter.

"The director will see you now. Please, go ahead."

"Thank you," Taekjoo replied with a polite nod before stepping inside.

The door shut behind him. Bowing slightly, he looked up at the nameplate on the large desk: "Director of Foreign Intelligence, Kwak Young-han."

The man behind the desk was unmistakably the director. Though Taekjoo had seen his photos before, the impression he gave in person was entirely different. Feeling a rush of nervousness, Taekjoo spoke, his voice stiffer than usual.

"Hello, Director."

"I told you to take a break. Why are you here?" Director Kwak asked.

"I've rested enough," Taekjoo replied curtly.

Director Kwak shook his head as though the response had been predictable and gestured to the couch opposite him.

“Take a seat.”

“I’ll stand.”

“Yoon Jongwoo said you were badly injured.”

“I’m fine,” Taekjoo said firmly.

Director Kwak nodded in acknowledgment. He likely already knew about Taekjoo’s memory loss from Yoon Jongwoo. From his reserved tone and expression, it was clear that Taekjoo’s recollections hadn’t fully returned.

To ease the tension, Director Kwak took the lead in the conversation.

“I didn’t ask you to rest just for your own good. If your memory hasn’t returned, it’s unlikely you’ll be able to resume work immediately.”

“I wasn’t going to claim I’m ready to return just yet,” Kwon Taekjoo replied.

“Really?” Director Kwak leaned in slightly, a hint of surprise in his voice, then made a guess. “Or have you come to talk about your retirement?”

“No.” Taekjoo hesitated briefly before continuing, “I’d like to reconsider that decision.”

Although he had once expressed a desire to retire when his memory fully returned, he now saw no reason to make that move. Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t understand why he’d been so certain about leaving back then. For now, he decided to put the matter on hold until he was absolutely sure.

Director Kwak nodded respectfully, signaling that he accepted Taekjoo’s stance. Yet curiosity flickered on his face, revealing a silent question about the true reason behind Taekjoo’s visit. Taekjoo didn’t leave him waiting long.

“I came today to ask for a favor,” he said.

“A favor? I hope it’s something I can assist you with,” Director Kwak replied, though his tone carried a trace of caution.

Taekjoo explained calmly, “There’s someone I want to see.”

In the room, there was a single metal table for meeting with lawyers. Massive bars covered the windows, and additional chairs lined the walls. This part of the prison, closest to the outside world yet completely detached from it, carried an unusual atmosphere.

Kwon Taekjoo sat on one of the chairs and waited. The wait dragged on, and he aimlessly scanned the room until he heard footsteps behind the iron door. Soon, a prisoner accompanied

by a guard entered the room. It was Lim Daehyun. He looked older and thinner than in Taekjoo's memories.

Lim Daehyun gave him his characteristic smile as soon as he saw him. Kwon Taekjoo, expressionless, observed him until the man sat across from him.

Taekjoo had asked Director Kwak to arrange a meeting with Lim Daehyun. Ever since Daehyun had been convicted of espionage, interactions with him were strictly controlled—particularly for Taekjoo, given his position as an intelligence officer, which could easily spark unnecessary suspicions. The meeting would undoubtedly be recorded, and their conversation likely monitored. Still, Taekjoo felt it was necessary to see Daehyun at least once.

"It's been a long time. How have you been?" Lim Daehyun was the first to speak.

Taekjoo didn't answer. Daehyun simply smiled, like a child amused by someone's stubborn silence.

"You came all this way to see me, and you can't even say hello? Are you still holding a grudge?"

"A grudge? How could I feel anything for a man who betrayed me?"

"But your face tells a different story—you still look angry. And, frankly, you don't look so well."

"That's none of your business," Taekjoo replied coldly.

Keeping his distance, Lim Daehyun let out a short laugh.

"I'm surprised you wanted to see me. You're not the type to look back once you've decided to cut ties with someone, are you?"

Daehyun spoke as though he knew Taekjoo inside and out. And, in truth, they did share a history. After Taekjoo joined the National Intelligence Service, they had worked closely together for years. Daehyun had been both a mentor and a pillar of support during a time when Taekjoo had no one else to rely on. Though he had often burdened him with work, Daehyun's recognition of Taekjoo's talent had been satisfying. Perhaps that was why Daehyun's betrayal had cut so deeply.

As if the past were irrelevant, Daehyun asked about Taekjoo's mother.

"How's your mother? Is she doing well?"

"You always say unnecessary things. I doubt you actually care," Taekjoo replied with a cold edge.

Daehyun only smiled at the sharp response, raising his hands in mock innocence and meeting Taekjoo's gaze calmly. Even in the face of open hostility, he remained composed—shameless and self-assured, as always.

“Something seems to have happened,” Daehyun remarked, reading the tension in Taekjoo’s expression.

Unfazed, Taekjoo got straight to the point.

“Why did you do it?”

“Do what?” Daehyun asked, feigning surprise.

“Why did you betray me?” Taekjoo repeated, his voice pressing.

Daehyun leaned back slightly, studying him carefully. After a pause, he finally answered.

“Strange. Wasn’t the reason obvious from the start? Did you come here just to hear it again? Or is it that you desperately need someone to blame?”

“I know what you did and what you aimed to achieve. But I still don’t understand why.”

Daehyun smiled faintly and shrugged, answering nonchalantly, “It’s simple. To conceal one small truth, you need a big lie. And to hide that lie, you’ll need an even bigger, dirtier one. What I was trying to hide at first was just a very small truth.”

“But was it so important that you had to destroy your principles?” Taekjoo demanded.

“Principles?” Daehyun let out a cynical chuckle. “When I was young, like you, I believed in those. I thought I could strengthen my country, that my sacrifices would protect my family and the world. But do you really think that’s possible?”

Taekjoo didn’t know how to respond. He had always believed that his work was for the good of the country and its people. That belief had been his anchor, helping him endure every hardship and doubt. He’d thought of his actions as being purely for the greater good.

But Daehyun seemed to see things differently. He spoke the word “patriotism” thoughtfully, as if savoring its taste.

“Patriotism. A perfect excuse to destroy and ruin. Did you honestly think you were working for the good of the country? How naïve.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“There comes a time when you start to question everything you do. You tell yourself it’s for the country, for the people, as you work day and night. But then one day, you ask yourself: Is it really for the country? Or is it just a cover for the benefit of a select few? When those doubts arise, you either walk away or accept that you’re part of the lies that serve those in power.”

In intelligence work, it was often necessary to turn a blind eye to unpleasant truths or ignore inconvenient facts. The job demanded absolute obedience to authority, leaving no room for refusal. Taekjoo wondered: Could he confidently say that everything he had done up until

now had been for the country's peace? Could he claim that the intelligence he'd risked his life to gather had always been used for good?

It was a dilemma every intelligence officer faced at some point. Loyalty to the organization often became slavery to power.

"I started to doubt it. But when I tried to return to my old self, it was already too late. My parents were gone, my family had fallen apart, my friends had disappeared. There was no one left who knew the real me. Everything I had worked so hard to build—my achievements, my career—meant nothing outside of that world. How could I start over? Get a new job? Live a new life? It was impossible. No one would accept a résumé that didn't exist. My entire record was erased."

Taekjoo understood his pain. He, too, had severed ties with his friends upon joining the intelligence service. Family visits had grown scarce. Conversations about his work were off-limits, and over time, his relationships faded into nothing. His friends had graduated, started jobs, and moved on with their lives, leaving him feeling as though he inhabited a completely different world.

Even so, Taekjoo believed that isolation was an inevitable part of his life. Agents like him lived like shadows, keeping secrets even from their loved ones. The only way to return to normalcy was retirement—and even then, the past had to remain buried.

"Those who keep too many secrets end up alone. Living in total isolation, with no connections left, is unbearable. Can anyone survive such a life after giving everything, only to go unnoticed?" Daehyun shook his head.

"A noble sacrifice for the country. How many do you think stay for that supposed glory? Maybe everyone starts out with youthful ideals, but eventually, they start looking up. Because without that, their lives pass without recognition. Perhaps you can scrape by on past merits, but what about your family? The people you care about?"

Taekjoo remained silent.

"I'm not asking you to understand my choices. I don't expect your forgiveness. But think about it—will you ever live a quiet, peaceful life as an ordinary citizen? Or will you regret it? Maybe it's time to start thinking about aiming higher."

Taekjoo's anger flared at Daehyun's self-serving justifications. But what infuriated him most was that he couldn't entirely refute the man's words. His fists trembled with impotent rage, knuckles white from the tension.

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Chapter End Notes

Support the author by purchasing the novel on Ridibooks.

Return To Zero

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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“Hey, Sunbae! Sitting here all alone again—so sad!”

Before Yoon Jongwoo even sat down, he grabbed the bottle of soju out of Kwon Taekjoo’s hand. He poured a glass for Taekjoo, muttering in mock irritation about being unable to wait for him. Taekjoo simply smiled and said, “You’re finally here?” Jongwoo shot him a mildly annoyed glance and waved for the passing waiter to bring another bottle, which quickly arrived.

“Did you wait long?”

“Not really.”

That was a lie. Taekjoo had already downed two bottles of soju by himself. Jongwoo noticed the empty bottles and frowned.

“You’ve already had this much? Aren’t you worried your wound might reopen?”

“My wound?” Taekjoo flexed the leg where he’d been injured. “It’s healed.”

The injury had healed quickly during his time on the island, and he was even able to jog a little now. Sure, his naturally strong physique helped, but most of his recovery came from having the chance to rest. Jongwoo couldn’t hide his amazement at the rapid progress.

“That’s incredible. You got shot, and now look at you.”

“Practice, and you’ll be fine. I told you.”

“Easy for you to say. Some things come naturally to you—muscle, strength. Not everyone can train themselves to be like that.”

“Stop making excuses. Start walking more, at least.”

Jongwoo scowled and muttered under his breath. Taekjoo ignored him and refilled his glass.

“I met with Director Lim today.”

“What?”

Jongwoo froze mid-movement, his expression one of utter shock. His mouth hung open, and soju dribbled onto the table. Taekjoo passed him a napkin.

“Why are you so surprised? I just wanted to see if he remembered anything.”

“But why didn’t you ask me first? Did you really have to meet him in person to find out?”

“There were other things I needed to ask.”

Jongwoo glanced at Taekjoo, noticing the faint traces of deep thought and anxiety etched into his expression. Recently, Taekjoo had discovered Director Lim’s betrayal during the period when he’d lost his memory. It had clearly shaken him.

Uncertain how to offer comfort, Jongwoo hesitated, and Taekjoo continued:

“This time… something felt off.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know how many times I’ve been on the brink of death in this line of work. Each time, I come back alive, write my report, take a short break, and go back to the grind. It’s just the cycle.”

“And?”

“I knew that. None of it’s new. But this time… it all felt pointless.”

“Pointless? You?”

“Why? Can’t I feel that way?”

“Well, you’re always so driven—practically bursting with energy for the job.”

“Driven? Maybe I’m just getting old. What’s left of my drive now feels more like anger. I’m burning through energy without knowing where to direct it.”

Jongwoo shook his head thoughtfully.

“That’s surprising.”

“What is?”

“You lose your memory, and suddenly you’re all calm and introspective... Maybe losing memories isn’t so bad after all.”

Taekjoo lightly tapped Jongwoo’s forehead with a spoon. Jongwoo clutched the spot dramatically, pretending to cry out in pain.

“Ow! That hurt! Okay, okay, I take it back—your temper’s definitely still here.”

“Anyway, I can’t fully explain it. When I lost my memory, the one thing keeping me going was the idea of coming home. I was convinced that once I got back, everything would be fine. But when I finally returned—wounded, exhausted—I found a stranger in my place. Director Lim had long been disgraced, my mother in Canada was more worried about some random guy than me, and I thought… what was all that effort for?”

“I see.”

Jongwoo was beginning to understand what weighed on Taekjoo’s mind. Even after regaining his memory, it was hard to accept everything as it was. Some pieces of the past were better left unacknowledged. For Taekjoo, those pieces were Lim’s betrayal and Zhenya’s existence.

For Jongwoo, it was equally difficult to grasp that Taekjoo and Zhenya had not only become close but had fallen in love. The shock lingered. Taekjoo likely felt it even more deeply.

Could someone truly fall back in love with a person after rediscovering they’d once been together—especially when only the worst memories of that person remained, as in Taekjoo’s case?

“So, how’s Mr. Yevgeny?”

At the mention of Zhenya, Taekjoo visibly tensed but quickly masked it with indifference.

“How do you know he’s not here?”

“Well, you didn’t come together. He wouldn’t have let you go alone.”

“I left him there. Once I remembered the unpleasant moments, I couldn’t even look at him.”

Jongwoo nodded, sympathetic. It was hard to know what to say. He didn’t fully grasp the depth of what Taekjoo had endured with Zhenya or how they’d become a couple. But knowing Zhenya’s volatile nature, Jongwoo could only imagine Taekjoo had endured more than anyone should.

If the past haunted Taekjoo so much, being in the same space as Zhenya must have been unbearable. But what about Zhenya? Had he really let Taekjoo go so easily? That didn’t seem like him. Jongwoo even imagined Zhenya launching a missile in a fit of rage, triggering an unexpected conflict between Korea and Russia.

The thought made him glance nervously around the room, his body trembling slightly. Taekjoo noticed and frowned.

“What’s with you? Need to use the restroom?”

“No, I’m just worried.”

“About who? That idiot? Don’t bother. He’s not a child; he’ll manage.”

Taekjoo’s curt response betrayed his hurt. Jongwoo, unsure how to proceed, decided to drop it.

“Well, yeah. But, you know, Russia’s in crisis right now. Something about a war or whatever.”

“War?”

Taekjoo looked genuinely shocked. He’d been so consumed with piecing together his memories that he’d completely ignored world events. Jongwoo leaned in closer, speaking in a low voice.

“Russia’s been aggressive ever since the fall of the Union. Talking about returning to Cold War times, always eyeing their neighbors. They’ve been strengthening ties with Iran, China, and North Korea to justify their moves. Headquarters thinks their interest in the microorganisms from Mount Paektu was part of that strategy. Even if they’re not weapons, without a proper cure, those microorganisms could spark a pandemic.”

Taekjoo’s expression darkened. Russia’s actions directly impacted the Bogdanov family.

“So Zhenya… he’s going to war too?”

“He’s still tied to their intelligence services. Even if he’s not on the front lines, he’s likely supplying weapons.”

Zhenya had always been entangled in such activities. Despite his involvement with the embassy in South Korea, he’d never fully severed ties with the FSB. As part of the Alpha Squad, he was an ideal candidate for combat. Even if the Bogdanov family kept him off the battlefield, he had the means to provide support, like Anastasia.

Zhenya had been this way from the start. Taekjoo realized he should never have gotten involved with him. Continuing their relationship… was it the right thing to do?

Jongwoo observed Taekjoo’s grim face and quietly added, “But Miss Olga said Mr. Yevgeny isn’t interested in those things.”

“What things?”

“Family glory. Russia’s prosperity. That’s why they pressure him to prove his loyalty.”

Even in Taekjoo's memories, Zhenya never aligned with any particular side. Despite being sent to rescue Sakamoto Hiro, his actions often defied expectations. He hadn't killed Taekjoo despite knowing his activities and had even posed as his ally, offering whatever support he could.

Zhenya seemed out of place in the Bogdanov family. The only thing he seemed to genuinely value was his own feelings.

Reflecting on this, Kwon Taekjoo suddenly muttered, "That damned bastard." Yoon Jongwoo glanced at him in surprise, but Taekjoo didn't notice, too absorbed in his own thoughts.

Taekjoo's mind wandered back to a conversation he'd had with Zhenya on Ajinoki. It had been clear then that Zhenya had little regard for his family or simply chose to ignore them altogether. A sudden, sharp headache struck Taekjoo as fragmented memories surfaced—Olga's visit to his home, his argument with Zhenya, and the intruders who had attacked the island in his absence.

During that attack, Taekjoo had been injured, and the weapons confiscated from the assailants were of Russian origin. This implied that either the Bogdanov family or the Russian government had been prepared to use force against him. The spent shell casings scattered across the island told the story of just how relentless the assault had been.

"No one can enter this place without my permission."

That's what Zhenya always said. And his words weren't just empty boasts, especially considering the advanced defense systems he had installed on the island. The place was a fortress—impenetrable to outsiders. But that security came at the cost of total isolation. Did Zhenya really believe that was the best way to live?

How many times had Zhenya stepped in to help him? For Zhenya, these actions might have seemed like mere diversions. But for Russia, they bordered on treason. Taekjoo had never fully considered what Zhenya had endured to stay by his side or the sacrifices he had made along the way. That realization left him feeling unsettled.

Could Taekjoo's decision to leave the National Intelligence Service (NIS) have had something to do with Zhenya? Perhaps he no longer wanted to feel indebted to him—or worse, guilty.

"Do you really not understand why I decided to leave?"

"No. You haven't told me yet, have you?" Yoon Jongwoo replied, tilting his head slightly.

"Was there nothing unusual about me at the time? No major event that could've changed everything?"

Jongwoo thought for a moment before his eyes lit up with sudden realization.
"Wait—you mentioned being sent to Vladivostok before the Iran operation, right? That joint mission between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan? Things went sideways, and the whole

operation got exposed. Of all the agents involved, you were the only one who made it back alive."

"That's right."

"And it was because of Mr. Yevgeny, wasn't it? We never got the full details, but from what I've heard, he helped you escape. That's why there were suspicions about you working with him."

Zhenya wasn't just a Russian diplomat; he was also a powerful figure within his family and a key member of the FSB. Naturally, the NIS couldn't ignore his interference in the mission. And when only Taekjoo—Zhenya's known associate—returned alive, it fueled suspicions of collusion between them.

What had Taekjoo himself been thinking during that time? The events in Vladivostok likely planted seeds of doubt in his superiors' minds. Still, the devastation of having his years of trust shattered in an instant must have been overwhelming. Perhaps he had even been angry with Zhenya—for risking everything to rescue him. Instead of protecting his lover, Zhenya's actions had only complicated matters, leaving Taekjoo feeling powerless.

Just as Zhenya had been willing to give up everything for him, Taekjoo realized he might need to do the same. Trying to hold on to everything simultaneously was nothing more than greed—selfish, foolish greed.

In his mind, Taekjoo could still hear Zhenya's desperate cry: *"Taekjooooo!"* He couldn't shake the memory of those piercing blue eyes, filled with pain and despair.

He stood in front of Zhenya's house for a long time, as if lost in thought. The door's lock would only open after scanning a pre-registered fingerprint and iris. Taekjoo grasped the handle, testing it out of habit. When the system recognized his fingerprint, a satisfying mechanical click echoed. He looked up at the blinking lens above his head and raised his eye to meet the scanner. A laser scanned his iris slowly, and the door unlocked immediately. Confused, he pulled on the handle, and the light reflecting off the door from outside vanished. The security system had deactivated after identifying him as an authorized visitor.

It suddenly hit Taekjoo: just like on Ajinoki, Zhenya had a lot of enemies.

The fact that his fingerprints and iris were registered meant he was a frequent visitor. Yet, everything about the place felt strange and unfamiliar, as though he were stepping into it for the first time.

Inside, the house was dark and eerily quiet, as if it had been uninhabited for a long time. The air was heavy and stale. Taekjoo started by pulling back the thick curtains and opening every window to let fresh air in. Once the room was lit, he took a slow look around.

The living room housed a large sofa that could comfortably seat two grown men. Behind it stretched a long kitchen counter, its surface completely dry, with no signs of recent use. Opening the fridge, Taekjoo found a variety of familiar food containers. Everything inside

was prepared without paprika or paste. The pantry was stocked with a range of ready-made meals and noodles, much like the ones back at Ajinoki.

Letting out a deep sigh, he moved to the bedroom. The spacious room was almost bare, save for an enormous bed that couldn't have been bought at an ordinary store. Taekjoo doubted Zhenya had chosen it with him in mind—after all, Zhenya rarely shifted while sleeping.

Why were Zhenya's habits so easy to recall? Shaking his head, he entered the walk-in closet attached to the bedroom.

Familiar clothes hung on open racks. Among them were several suits, all belonging to Taekjoo. It seemed he'd left some things here in case he was suddenly called back to headquarters. Opening the bottom drawer, he found neatly folded underwear and socks, just as he'd been taught in the army.

"Feels like home, doesn't it?"

He muttered to himself, mocking his own thoughts as he headed to the bathroom. Inside were two sets of toothbrushes, razors, and personal care items. The showerhead was set high to accommodate the house's tall owner, and the bathtub was so spacious a child could have swum in it.

The more he observed the house, the more apparent it became that traces of their shared life lingered everywhere. It felt as though he were living in two homes at once, and the realization left a bitter taste.

He returned to the bedroom and picked up a book on space science from the nightstand. Sitting on the bed, he opened it to a page marked by a slight crease. After smoothing it out, he leaned back, propping a pillow behind him.

Still, something was missing. He longed for something softer, warmer, enveloping him.

"Taekjoo..."

A memory surfaced—him sitting on the bed or the sofa with a book in hand while Zhenya, as usual, quietly approached. Zhenya would sit beside him, lean his shoulder against Taekjoo's, and nuzzle his hair or ear with his nose.

Without resistance, Taekjoo would use him as a giant pillow and continue reading. Zhenya, content in the embrace, would occasionally kiss his ear, neck, or shoulder, sometimes playfully rubbing his face against Taekjoo's thick hair.

"Were you waiting for me to get to this part?"

When Zhenya's hands would begin to wander under his shirt, Taekjoo would stop him abruptly. Zhenya never resisted; he would simply wait, resting his hand on Taekjoo's stomach or chest, stroking gently.

But Zhenya's patience always ran out, and when he started pulling at his nipples or nibbling his earlobe, that was the limit. As soon as Taekjoo tensed his shoulders or neck, Zhenya, as if

expecting it, would slip this hand into his pants. He'd began to stroke his eager cock slowly but surely. Long, nimble fingers moved deftly, and Taekjoo had no choice but to surrender. Zhenya knew exactly which places on his body were especially sensitive and how they should be touched to give him pleasure.

"A newborn puppy would have more patience than you," he said sarcastically.

"Taekjoo…"

Zhenya repeated his name pleadingly, over and over, as if trying to subdue him. And each time, Taekjoo surrendered without a fight.

"Haa…"

Those openly sexual images resurfaced in his mind, as vivid as if they were happening right before his eyes. Taekjoo tried to push them away, but the thoughts lingered. Just recalling those moments made his skin, the same skin Zhenya had touched, react again.

"Damn it."

He muttered, scratching the back of his neck. He felt as though he were on the set of a massive film studio, being secretly recorded. His anger toward Zhenya hadn't subsided, but everything around him screamed that their relationship wasn't nearly as shallow as he'd thought.

Now what? It had been his own decision to accept Zhenya. Did that mean he had to take responsibility for it? Even if he didn't feel like it, should he acknowledge Zhenya?

Shaking his head, he walked back into the living room. Another wave of memories swept over him. As soon as one surfaced, more followed, pulling him back into that time. Like when Zhenya argued on the phone with his mother, carelessly choosing his words, or the time he tried to stop Taekjoo from going to work, which had sparked a huge fight.

It all happened when Taekjoo failed a mission and sank into a deep depression. He'd promised Zhenya they'd go on vacation together after the operation. Zhenya had waited patiently, confident that Taekjoo would keep his word. But headquarters came up with a new plan to correct the failure and summoned him back. Taekjoo wanted to fix his mistakes.

But Zhenya wasn't going to let him go so easily.

"You said it was over."

"I didn't hit the target. The operation's only temporarily done."

"And now? You're leaving again?"

"It's my job."

"Is it that important?"

“Are you serious?”

Taekjoo always kept work and personal life separate. When they clashed, duty came first. This time was no exception.

“Don’t you get it? Stop whining—you’re not a child!”

Taekjoo snapped when Zhenya blocked his way. Zhenya had expected such a response, but it still stung. Frustration and barely contained anger simmered inside him.

“I can barely stop myself from locking you up again.”

For someone like Psych, force had always been preferable to patience. Becoming Kwon Taekjoo’s lover hadn’t changed his nature at all. Even so, he tried to suppress it to keep Taekjoo close.

“Don’t go.”

“I have to.”

“Taekjoo, don’t test my patience.”

“Damn it, if it’s so hard for you to control yourself, go find someone else! You’re a professional at this.”

Taekjoo shot back, venting his frustration. Zhenya’s face, which had been full of anger just moments ago, suddenly went blank. He looked devastated.

“Am I that insignificant to you?”

Zhenya asked softly. It was an obvious misstep. But Taekjoo couldn’t bring himself to apologize then. He didn’t want to ruin everything over his emotions, yet all he could think about was how to fix his mistake.

“How much more do I need to adjust to you? All you do is forbid me from doing things. Am I supposed to sit here like a dog, waiting for you to toss me a bone and thank you for every little favor?”

Zhenya continued, pressing him. Taekjoo decided not to respond, knowing it would only hurt them both.

“We’ll talk when I’m back.”

“No. That won’t work.”

“Please…”

“I have the right to refuse too, Taekjoo. And I refuse.”

Zhenya said, gripping him tightly. But the fear of rejection stopped him from going any further.

“Don’t let me see you anytime soon. Otherwise, I’ll kill you.”

Taekjoo said, pushing him aside. On his way out, he saw the food Zhenya had prepared especially for him. This uncharacteristic gesture of care stirred a storm of emotions in Taekjoo. It was so hard to find balance with someone who didn’t even grasp the concept of a normal life or relationship.

So why did he keep forgiving Zhenya and holding on to him? It was something he never fully understood. He couldn’t pinpoint when Zhenya had started to feel different to him.

The only thing clear was that Taekjoo himself had let him into his life, grown deeply attached to him, and even considered quitting his job at the National Intelligence Service for his safety. Even now, with his memory incomplete, he still worried about Zhenya, who was alone.

“I just quit.”

“What?”

Zhenya asked, his voice sharp with disbelief.

“I’m tired of running from you. I gave up. Because no matter where I hide, you’ll always find me. And there are people I need to protect.”

Taekjoo admitted, his tone resigned. For that statement to hold true, he shouldn’t have been sobbing drunkenly in front of Zhenya back then. Taekjoo vividly recalled how restless he’d been during those days when Zhenya had stopped contacting him after announcing he was leaving for Russia. Later, he learned the reason: an arranged marriage his relatives were pressuring him into.

Taekjoo consoled himself with the thought that Zhenya had accepted him under duress, but when he heard of his engagement to another man, an unsettling unease took over. Wasn’t that what he had wanted all along? For Zhenya to leave him and return to his country as quickly as possible? Now, nothing about his feelings made sense. He drank himself into oblivion trying to escape them.

“Damn it… it’s always you… damn it…”

“Taekjoo?”

“If you’re going to leave, then leave already. Why do you keep messing with my head?”

“I don’t know what you mean. If anyone has the right to be angry, it’s me, not you.”

He could clearly recall the confused expression on Zhenya’s face, so unprepared for such behavior. Taekjoo, gripping Zhenya’s cheek in frustration, surrendered:

“Engagement? That’s not going to work, damn it.”

“Is that what all this fuss is about?”

“Say whatever you want—I’m not stepping aside. Even if you stay single forever, I don’t care.”

Drunk and uninhibited, Taekjoo let his true feelings spill out. He didn’t want to give up his job or Zhenya. He lacked the courage to make that leap.

“Can’t even you give me some attention? Not even you…”

Taekjoo pleaded, tears welling up in his eyes. He was begging Zhenya to be patient, to wait until he could figure out how to let go of everything and leave. A grown man, four years Zhenya’s senior, was reduced to childlike desperation: *Don’t leave me.*

Taekjoo groaned, burying his face in his hands. He trembled with shame—why were such trivial memories haunting him now?

“If you want to know where I am, who I’m with—if you want to control me and restrict me—just do it.”

Zhenya said suddenly. Taekjoo asked, puzzled.

“What?”

“The engagement, the wedding… if it bothers you, tear it all apart. Forbid me from everything.”

“Why are you spouting nonsense now?”

“You said it wouldn’t work. You said if I disappeared, you’d kill me.”

“Me? Seriously?”

“You threatened me in every language you could manage. Then you spent the entire night begging me to stay with you.”

“Ha! Don’t be ridiculous! That never happened!”

“It did, Taekjoo. It really did.”

Taekjoo felt exhausted. The relentless monotony of daily life had crept up on him, dulling his senses. Not even completing challenging tasks brought him satisfaction anymore. But everything changed when he met Zhenya. He was unlike anyone Taekjoo had ever encountered. Every clash with Zhenya pushed him to his limits, made his heart race. His blood surged, alive and electric, making him feel every second of life intensely. He realized that for the rest of his life, nothing could exhilarate him more than this man. And this man, in turn, had confessed a love that could only be described as improper.

“Don’t worry. I won’t disappear. The only time I’ll ever leave you is if you die.”

Those strange words somehow reassured Taekjoo. He hadn't realized just how worried he was. Remembering how Zhenya had once locked him up in Ajinoki, he kept telling himself he had to escape, but an inexplicable calm settled over him instead. He lost track of time, of his circumstances, as he savored an unfamiliar kind of freedom. Never in his life had he spent such mundane days.

Zhenya had been Taekjoo's first serious test, his first defeat, and a source of unique exhilaration—a mix of ambition and a contradictory sense of peace. Letting him go felt like leaving a massive debt unpaid. No matter how much he tried to justify it, Zhenya had been his choice from the very beginning. And whether it was anger or affection he felt now, the right thing to do was to bring him back and think about the future. This time, before it was too late.

Resolute, Taekjoo pulled out his phone and dialed a number. A few rings, and the line connected. Soon, a familiar voice answered.

"Taekjoo?"

It was Olga, clearly surprised by the unexpected call.

"Yes, how are you?"

"Where are you? Where are you calling from? Is everything okay?"

"Where, where… I'm at home."

"I thought that guy had kidnapped you."

"He did, but I escaped. I remember everything now."

Olga sighed quietly. She didn't need a detailed explanation—she already understood why Taekjoo had left Zhenya.

"So, it came to this in the end."

She murmured with a heavy exhale. Then, in an effort to prevent misunderstandings, she tried to justify Zhenya's actions.

"I know it looks like he deceived you and that you're upset, but it wasn't entirely his fault. I was the one who suggested it. Jongwoo and I were afraid you'd remember the bad things and get hurt again. We hoped that maybe the bad memories would stay buried, and only the good ones would return."

"Hoped, my ass. Did you really think it'd go the way you planned?"

"I guess it was a bit presumptuous. Were you really that scared?"

"Seeing him sleep next to me almost killed me."

Although Taekjoo spoke seriously, he smiled faintly. But the strange confession didn't end there.

"To be honest, I was a little curious."

"Curious about what exactly?"

"I wondered if Taekjoo would fall in love with him again, even without the memories."

"What, the guy decided to test me?"

"Test you? That sounds so crude. He just wanted you to have a beautiful love story. What's wrong with that?"

Olga had the audacity to say that. In truth, if Taekjoo hadn't known anything about the events that occurred before she and Zhenya became lovers, perhaps it would have been better. After all, the return of forgotten memories was just as painful as the experiences themselves.

But even if those were the worst moments, it would've been a mistake to erase them completely. Relationships forged through trials wouldn't feel the same without the weight of the past. Life is the sum of all accumulated memories. If some were erased without a trace, then Taekjoo would no longer be himself.

"Anyway, it was a big shock. I'm sorry. Even though the doctor warned me it might be dangerous, I did it my way."

"It's fine, that's enough. I didn't call to hear apologies."

"Then why did you call?"

"I wanted to know what happened to Zhenya."

"What happened to him?"

Olga's voice betrayed her surprise. Taekjoo felt uneasy, nervously clicking his tongue.

"I don't know. Maybe he's starving after being dumped by his first love twice?"

She said lightly, with a mocking tone, as if the tangled situation amused her.

"Don't joke like that. Do you have any news about him?"

"It's not a joke. You know, Taekjoo, you seem to think he and I are truly inseparable siblings. I've told you a thousand times—we don't even speak. Why do you keep asking me about him?"

"Because you're the only one in your family who cares about him in some way."

"Maybe. But even my relatives are starting to cast me aside. The situation is clearly deteriorating—strangers are constantly showing up at the house, the phone never stops

ringing… someone is always looking for my father or my brothers. Everything points to something big brewing."

"I've heard rumors about a possible war."

"For now, it's just a rumor, but it seems they're determined to use this situation to display their power. Judging by how often his name comes up in conversations with my father and brothers, they plan to use the weapons he created to threaten war. The tension might make the enemy surrender before anything starts."

"But he has no intention of cooperating, does he?"

"No, he won't leave the islands. It seems they're trying to win him over, but it's unlikely to work. They've even sent military planes there, several of which have already been shot down."

Taekjoo imagined Zhenya defending the isolated island alone against relentless attacks aimed at breaking him. Was he hurt? Did he blame Taekjoo for leaving him behind? Could it be that he was still waiting for Taekjoo to come back? These thoughts overwhelmed his mind.

"I'd like to know more, but I can't reach him, and I can't get to the island. The only comfort is that 'no news is good news."

Olga sighed. Taekjoo listened in silence, then made a final decision and asked:

"I need your help."

It had been a long time since Taekjoo last visited the memorial cemetery. This wasn't the anniversary of his father's or brother's death, nor was it a national holiday. It was also the first time he was here without his mother. In his hands, he held the lilies Zhenya had once wanted to lay down.

As he walked past the commemorative monument honoring fallen heroes and defenders of the nation, he saw endless rows of headstones. Each one bore words of honor, loyalty, and glory. He had once believed that this would be his future too. And back then, it seemed fine—at least it wouldn't have been an empty life. But today, that burden felt different.

"I'm here, Father."

He said as he approached the grave. His father's tombstone, like the others, glorified his deeds and service. Taekjoo wondered if his father and brother had truly seen their deaths as honorable to the end. Had they regretted it, even for a moment?

Once, he too had thought such a life held meaning. After all, you only live once, and it seemed better to devote it to something significant rather than waste it. He had abandoned that idea for a time, enrolling in a regular university just to please his mother. Yet, even her concerns couldn't stop him from eventually choosing his own path.

“A lot has happened. Everything’s still a mess in my head—I’m not sure what’s right and what’s wrong. But I’ve decided to focus on one thing. I don’t like complications, so I’m sticking to this one thing.”

He admitted candidly in front of his father for the first time. He wasn’t seeking understanding or justification; he just wanted to reaffirm his decision. One thought now consumed him: when his final hour came, would he, like his father and brother, be able to leave without regrets, knowing he had lived a worthy life? The only thing that could hold him back was one man.

Director Kwak stared grimly at the report on the situation in North Korea. Reliable sources indicated that Russia was on the brink of declaring war, with China and North Korea poised to openly offer their support. Although these countries had long been linked by socialist ideology, the strengthening of their alliance was a troubling sign for Northeast Asia's security —especially South Korea. It was a grave threat.

In response, South Korea, the United States, and Japan had bolstered their cooperation, holding continuous meetings to devise contingency measures. Tensions between nations escalated daily.

The National Intelligence Director met with the president almost every day. Today, as well, Director Kwak was expected at a meeting led by the president to discuss possible responses.

Before he could finish reviewing the materials, a sudden knock on the door interrupted him. He glanced at his watch and realized it was time to leave.

“Come in.”

As expected, his secretary entered and bowed respectfully.

“Sir, the car is ready.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

Director Kwak grabbed his clipboard, donned his jacket, and left his office. When he reached the underground parking lot, the company car was already waiting. He climbed in.

“We need to hurry.”

The secretary urged, checking his watch again. The driver nodded silently and pulled out of the parking lot. Turning slightly, the secretary informed the director of their estimated arrival time.

“We’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“Understood.”

Director Kwak replied, returning his focus to his clipboard. The upcoming meeting with the president and other leaders was tense. Given the significance of the issue, every word needed

to be carefully chosen.

“Wait, why are we taking this route?”

The secretary suddenly asked, noticing the car making an unexpected turn. This was more than just a mistake—something was clearly wrong. At that moment, the driver reached abruptly for the secretary. It happened so quickly that the secretary didn’t even have time to scream before losing consciousness. Director Kwak froze, realizing they were under attack. He instinctively reached for his weapon.

“It’s me, Director.”

A familiar voice came from the driver’s seat. Director Kwak glanced at the rearview mirror and recognized the driver’s face. It was Kwon Taekjoo.

“You?”

It was clear Taekjoo had deliberately disguised himself as the driver to approach without raising suspicion. But why go to such elaborate lengths? Director Kwak couldn’t fathom his intent.

“What are you doing?”

“I need to talk to you. The secretary will wake up soon, don’t worry.”

“If you had something to say, why didn’t you come directly to headquarters? Do you realize this could turn into a massive problem?”

“Only if you choose to make it one.”

Taekjoo replied calmly, unfazed by potential repercussions. He had always been like this—never shying away from any means to achieve his goals. It made him an exceptional agent, but at this moment, his actions resembled nothing short of a reckless kidnapping.

Director Kwak sighed and checked his watch.

“Five minutes. No more.”

“That’s plenty for me.”

“Fine. What do you want to know?”

“The microorganisms obtained from Iran—where and how are they being used now?”

Director Kwak raised an eyebrow, clearly surprised, but gave no clear answer.

“Your mission ended with their delivery to Park Chongho. You’re not supposed to interfere beyond that.”

“I thought my work was for the greater good. At least, not for the interests of a select few. Am I wrong?”

Taekjoo’s gaze in the rearview mirror was filled with determination, as if he sought confirmation that his years of sacrificing his personal life and taking risks for missions had truly served the state and humanity. Perhaps his faith, which had sustained him until now, had started to waver after regaining his memory.

Director Kwak sighed and responded cautiously:

“I can’t give you a definitive answer. Our job was to ensure the microorganisms were acquired. Anything beyond that is out of our hands. It’s a complex issue. Revealing their existence might not necessarily be the right thing to do.”

During the joint operation in Vladivostok, the goal had been to prevent the new pathogenic microorganism from being used for malicious purposes. However, after the microorganisms were safely secured, information about them was never made public. When or how this information would surface remained unknown. To Taekjoo, it all felt like a waste, and he questioned why he had risked his life.

“Sometimes I wonder: is everything I do truly for the people? Or is it all for the safety and benefit of a select few?”

“Those doubts are understandable. But it all depends on perspective. In the end, it’s for the good of the country.”

“If only I could blindly believe that, it’d be easier.”

Director Kwak remained silent. He knew many agents faced similar inner conflicts. Sometimes, events didn’t unfold as planned. Moreover, South Korea’s intelligence agencies had never operated with complete independence.

“Have you regained your memory?”

“Yes.”

“And now you want to leave?”

“It was always part of the plan. So yes, I think it’s time.”

Director Kwak nodded slowly. Losing an agent as talented as Taekjoo would be a huge loss. Finding someone so dedicated and willing to make any sacrifice would be nearly impossible. If there had been any way to keep him, that would have been the right decision. But he had no reason to retain someone whom the country had already abandoned once.

“It’s a shame, of course. Finding a replacement for someone like you won’t be easy.”

“That’s true.”

Taekjoo responded with a touch of arrogance, and Director Kwak couldn't help but chuckle lightly. With a smile on his face, he realized that Taekjoo had come for a different reason.

"But that's not the only thing you wanted to discuss, is it? You didn't go through all this just to throw a resignation letter in my face, did you?"

"I heard that before going to Iran, I was suspected of treason. How was that resolved?"

"Officially, you're listed as killed in action, so no one can accuse you now."

"And what about Ambassador Bogdanov?"

"I don't think he'll bring it up now. The operation in Vladivostok failed, but you completed the mission in Iran brilliantly, proving your innocence through your 'death.' Besides, there are more important matters at hand right now."

"You mean they could bring it up again if they want to?"

Director Kwak raised an eyebrow and shrugged, as if to say that this was a common occurrence. Then he added with a hint of sarcasm:

"As far as I know, Bogdanov isn't in Korea right now. If Zhenya doesn't return to Korea, it'll be impossible to bring him to justice, no matter how much you want it. After all, he was a Russian diplomat, and his government won't extradite him. Only problems would arise if he were to enter the country."

Zhenya's only mistake had been interfering in official matters to save his lover. Love was his crime. There was only one solution to this dilemma.

Looking at the determined Taekjoo, Director Kwak asked anxiously:

"Are you sure? Even if you leave, you'll find it difficult to live a normal life. Many temptations and threats await you."

"I'm prepared. In any case, you can help me."

"Me?"

"Yes. It seems my resignation hasn't been processed yet."

"Well, that's because the body that supposedly belongs to you is still in Iran, and Yoon Jongwoo, who was sent to identify you, hasn't submitted a report yet."

"Then get the report from him and give me a star."

"A star? You mean a medal?"

"No, I don't want a medal. I don't want any recognition."

"Then what is it?"

“A nameless star.”

Director Kwak frowned. The “Nameless Star” was just a symbolic recognition for the sacrifices made by agents dedicated to serving the country. It was an honorable but solitary award that no one knew about or appreciated.

Director Kwak looked at Taekjoo with a puzzled expression, and Taekjoo continued to explain:

“I’ve decided to live a different life. To do that, it would be best if I were erased completely from this world. The State won’t bring back someone who’s already been declared dead. So, please, let my death happen in Iran, and don’t let my achievements or my name be mentioned anywhere. It’s better if everyone believes I’m truly dead.”

Taekjoo didn’t just want to retire. He was seeking the complete freedom that only death could offer. The man named Kwon Taekjoo would continue to live somewhere, but the agent Kwon Taekjoo would remain in the past forever. He was willing to leave everything behind, including any fame.

“If you’re unlucky, it might actually happen.”

“What do you mean?”

“From now on, everything I do will have nothing to do with the South Korean government or the National Intelligence Service. It will be my personal choice.”

Taekjoo spoke cryptically, as if he had a plan that Director Kwak didn’t want to interfere with. Director Kwak exhaled and accepted:

“I hope your future is bright.”

“If it is, I’ll make sure it is. No more running through dark corners where even mold thrives.”

“I see. Where are you going now?”

“There’s someone waiting for me.”

“I guess we won’t be saying goodbye?”

“Maybe not.”

They exchanged words as if joking. Just as Taekjoo was about to leave, Director Kwak said one last thing:

“You’ve done a good job.”

Kwon Taekjoo nodded silently, stepped out of the car, and quickly disappeared into the crowd of people heading home.

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Chapter End Notes

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In The End

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Bazim sat in his office, massaging his temples. Several sleepless nights had left his head feeling heavy. He reached for a glass of whiskey but paused when he saw it was empty. The same was true for the bottle. With a sigh, he rubbed his temples again.

The source of his recent worries was the issue of territorial reclamation, a concern that had long plagued the president. For some time, they had waited for the right moment. But the discovery of a new microorganism in North Korea had reignited the president's ambitions to restore the country's former glory, even at the cost of war. Following the terrorist attack in Iran, the president had found an additional pretext for action, which only accelerated the process. Almost daily, he pressured Bazim and other officials to take decisive steps.

In reality, though, Russia was unprepared for war. The country's economy depended heavily on oil and natural gas, but the moment Western sanctions hit, revenue would plummet. Military expenses would rise, the ruble would lose value, and the government's finances would teeter on the brink of collapse.

The president was enthralled by the dream of swiftly conquering the enemy. But no state wanted to see a stronger Russia. If neighboring countries united out of their own interests, the war would inevitably drag on. A prolonged conflict would erode motivation and weaken the nation. No one could guarantee the survival of the current regime. The Bogdanov family would bear the immense burden of military expenses and likely feel the full impact of the war.

Of course, it was crucial to demonstrate that Russia remained a strong power. But war wasn't the only way to achieve that. The Bogdanovs had always been traders at heart, and a war that brought more losses than gains was disadvantageous. Even if the president succeeded in

reclaiming the territories of the Russian Empire, it would take decades to reap any real benefits. Every calculation pointed to one conclusion: it wasn't worth it.

And yet, the president's will was the sole driving force behind the push for war. His power was near-absolute, and the Bogdanovs stayed at the top solely because of their unwavering support. To maintain their influence, they had to support his reckless dreams. The only way to minimize the damage was through a blitzkrieg. For that, Zhenya's *Anastasia* was essential.

It wasn't clear if Zhenya had completed the development of *Anastasia*. But he had already created a defensive system so effective that all attempts to approach Ajinoki had failed. Perhaps seeing *Anastasia* in action wasn't even necessary. A weapon that inspired fear and uncertainty with its potential could be more valuable if it remained hidden.

The president was obsessed with capturing *Anastasia*. The war was merely a cover; in truth, he feared that as long as *Anastasia* existed, he could never claim absolute authority.

The problem was that Zhenya wasn't someone easily intimidated. He had no hunger for power or wealth. Convincing him was practically impossible. Zhenya had severed all communication with the outside world. Every attempt to infiltrate or spy on the island ended in failure. Unless Zhenya left the island himself, there was no way to talk to him.

Bazim had even considered isolating Zhenya completely, hoping he'd surrender over time. However, Ajinoki was the perfect sanctuary. Zhenya could hunt or fish for his own food, and a blackout wouldn't significantly inconvenience him.

The only viable option was cutting the gas pipeline to the island. But Bazim knew that if cornered, Zhenya would choose death over surrender. He wouldn't go quietly.

All of this only added to the tension. Bazim had no idea how to solve this problem. The consequences for him and the Bogdanov family could be catastrophic.

"Ha..."

He sighed deeply, lost in thought, when the phone suddenly rang. It was the direct line to the president. Though no one was watching, Bazim immediately straightened up, cleared his throat, and answered.

"Yes, Mr. President."

"I told you to report before asking questions. What's the update on Psych?"

"I apologize, Mr. President. Psych's resistance has been stronger than expected, and it's proving difficult to approach Ajinoki. We're considering alternative options."

The president's voice grew sharper.

"If all we do is waste time, how will we achieve our great goal? I told you not to stop for anything. I don't care if we lose that small island as long as it leads to reclaiming the territory."

“Yes, I understand.”

“I hope you’re not hesitating because he’s your relative.”

“Of course not.”

“You seem too calm about this. I’ve never doubted your loyalty, Bazim.”

“I regret troubling you, Mr. President.”

“This is an opportunity to show the world that Russia is the greatest power on the planet. We cannot afford carelessness.”

“I have no doubt about that.”

“Once we confirm the existence of Anastasia, the fate of its guardian won’t matter. Anastasia belongs to Russia. We must reclaim it.”

Although Zhenya was a relative, the president didn’t hesitate to order his elimination. Bazim’s expression hardened.

“Understood. It will be done.”

“Don’t disappoint me, Bazim.”

The conversation ended, but something felt off. The characteristic click signaling the end of the call didn’t come. Instead, there was a faint noise, as if someone was eavesdropping.

Bazim narrowed his eyes and spoke in a low voice.

“Who’s there?”

A calm laugh answered him.

“You have sharp instincts, Bazim Vissarionovich Bogdanov. You remember me, don’t you?”

The voice sounded oddly familiar. Bazim had definitely heard it before. The accent wasn’t Russian. He hesitated, and then his eyes widened in realization.

“You… you’re that Korean spy.”

“Your memory is excellent. Then you must remember what I told you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I told you I spared you in Iran for one reason. If you weren’t related to Yevgeny, you’d already be dead. You can’t deny that, can you?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I hear you’re preparing for war. The president seems determined to eliminate Yevgeny and seize Anastasia.”

“You think you can spy on my conversation and get away with it?”

Bazim growled, fumbling under his desk for the alarm button. But before he could press it, a silenced shot rang out, shattering the glass behind him. Fortunately, the glass was bulletproof, so the first bullet didn’t penetrate. But the second shot, fired through the weakened spot, struck the panic button, destroying it.

“Don’t try anything foolish. Next time, I won’t miss.”

Bazim slowly turned around, spotting the red dot of a laser sight on his forehead. He glanced at the neighboring building but couldn’t locate the sniper.

Suppressing his anger, Bazim asked, *“What do you want?”*

“What do I want? For you to do nothing. We know what’s been discovered in North Korea and how you plan to use it. We already have it, and soon enough, we’ll find our way as well. The power you think you control will soon be meaningless.”

“If you kill me, nothing will change.”

“That remains to be seen. Yevgeny told me the Bogdanovs are traders to the core. You calculate everything, don’t you? First, you get rid of those who don’t benefit you, then you ask for help as if nothing happened, and now you’ve decided to steal what doesn’t belong to you.”

“I asked what you want.”

“I told you, do nothing. You’re fully aware of how reckless and pointless your plan is. Are you really so eager to leap into the flames, knowing you’ll burn?”

Kwon Taekjoo’s condemnation made Bazim’s anger flare.

“Even if it’s fire, I can’t stop. I don’t have the strength to do so.”

“Strength can always be found,” Kwon Taekjoo replied calmly. Then, with a sharper tone, he added, *“Listen carefully. If you try to use Yevgeny again, I won’t let it slide. Think it over. Next time, there will be no warning. I’m everywhere, and I can end you at any moment.”*

As he finished speaking, another shot rang out, this time shattering Bazim’s phone. The laser dot disappeared, and the presence on the other end was gone.

“Titov! Titov!”

Bazim shouted irritably, calling for his secretary. She rushed in, startled.

“What’s going on?”

Seeing the chaos in the office, she swallowed nervously. *"Are you all right, sir?"*

"There's a Korean spy here. Find him!"

Pushing past the stunned secretary, Bazim barked orders. The guards stationed outside hurriedly spread out in search of the intruder, but the spy had already vanished.

Still seething, Bazim slammed his fist onto the desk, unable to contain his rage.

Kwon Taekjoo arrived at Zhenya's armory. Before heading to Bazim's, he had stopped here to collect a sniper rifle and some explosives.

The old bookstore building seemed untouched. Dust rose with every step, tickling his nose. He covered his mouth with the back of his hand, suppressing a cough.

In front of the empty shelves stood a familiar rotary phone. Kwon Taekjoo dialed the code. Zhenya had mentioned before that he regularly changed the password in case the armory's location became known. For that reason, Taekjoo didn't bother asking for the code directly. Instead, he entered his own birthdate and felt his cheeks flush with embarrassment.

"Ha… That crazy bastard."

Kwon Taekjoo couldn't pinpoint when Zhenya had started using his birthdate as a password. How could someone so distrustful be this careless? Yet, if everything went as planned, that number wouldn't matter anymore.

The armory door creaked open, and Taekjoo began pulling weapons off the shelves. He hoped he wouldn't have to use all of them. While gathering what he needed, the sound of a helicopter's blades whirring outside reached his ears. It seemed his expected ally had arrived on time.

He closed the armory and stepped out. Even in the darkness, the bright pink helicopter stood out starkly. Kwon Taekjoo frowned involuntarily. The helicopter's blades slowed, and Olga, clad in a skintight suit like an action movie heroine, stepped out.

"Taekjoo, I'm here."

"I see that."

He muttered, giving her a once-over with a disapproving look. Her serious expression nearly made him laugh despite the gravity of their situation.

After ensuring that Olga was her usual self, Taekjoo scanned the surroundings cautiously, checking for followers.

"No one followed you?"

"I shook them all off. Don't worry."

She replied, tossing her long hair over her shoulder. Her entire family seemed to treat the unfolding chaos like some spy game, despite the very real threats hanging over their heads.

Olga handed Taekjoo the helicopter's keys, her voice tinged with concern.
"Are you sure about this?"

"About what?"

"You haven't contacted him. He doesn't even know you're back. What if he starts shooting the moment we reach the island?"

"All I can do is hope for the best. So far, luck hasn't let me down," Kwon Taekjoo replied indifferently, shrugging.

He couldn't be certain that Zhenya wouldn't open fire at the sight of Olga's helicopter. Zhenya might assume it was a trick orchestrated by the family to infiltrate the island.

But Taekjoo had no other choice. He had left Zhenya on that island and now had to bring him back. Leaving him alone, isolated from the world, his family, and the person he loved, was simply not an option.

"Oh, by the way, Bazim's launched a Russian manhunt for you. If you don't make it to Ajinoki, you'll spend the rest of your life on the run. I can't help you beyond this."

"I knew that would happen when I went to blackmail him. It doesn't matter. A cornered man gains supernatural strength."

"You're already cornered. There's nowhere to go."

"I don't care. Once I meet Zhenya, I'll figure something out."

"Won't you regret this?"

"I've already regretted enough," he said cryptically.

Olga lowered her head, not understanding his words, but Taekjoo didn't elaborate. Instead, he ruffled her hair and said:
"Thanks."

It sounded like a farewell.

"Good luck," she replied as Kwon Taekjoo climbed into the helicopter. She didn't say "*See you later,"* knowing full well she might never see him again.

Kwon Taekjoo simply nodded and took the controls. The blades began to spin, kicking up dust and a powerful wind. Olga crossed her arms and watched as the helicopter lifted into the sky.

She could only hope this new chapter would end as happily as the last one.

Kwon Taekjoo headed straight for Ajinoki. Although he had reassured Olga by saying he would leave everything to chance, the truth was, he had no other choice. He could only hope that Zhenya would recognize him in the helicopter.

As he crossed the vast ocean, his thoughts were consumed by Zhenya. No other concerns could break through. Taekjoo worried about how Zhenya, left behind yet again, might be coping. He imagined him sitting alone, day and night, and the image weighed heavily on his heart. Perhaps Zhenya hadn't followed him to Korea because he was too wounded. Maybe even someone as resilient as him had given up, accepting their relationship was over. Or perhaps Zhenya was so trapped in desperation he couldn't leave the island.

The more Kwon Taekjoo reflected, the more he felt the bitterness of Zhenya's fate. Abandoned by his family as a child, Zhenya had been forced to become a monster just to survive. He was only acknowledged when he destroyed others. Now, he was alone, wrung dry by the demands of his family and the State, expected to sacrifice everything he had for their prosperity.

Zhenya had always lacked a sense of normal humanity. Ordinary social norms didn't exist for him. He struggled to understand and accept others. Even so, he had tried to understand Taekjoo as a lover, doing his best to avoid his anger. But Kwon Taekjoo, often preoccupied with his own ambitions, rarely paid attention to his younger lover, whose inexperience was painfully obvious. His excuse was always: *"That's just the way I am."*

Taekjoo had believed Zhenya would manage on his own somehow. Unlike his previous partners, Zhenya was strong and wealthy. He thought Zhenya, who had always been adept at fending for himself, could endure this too. Perhaps his guilt wasn't as deep as it should have been, but as he recalled all his past mistakes, the weight became harder to bear.

"Ha… Who's the real trash here?" he muttered, scratching his ear nervously.

Taekjoo had thought their relationship was one where he made the compromises, but it seemed he had been wrong. If their roles had been reversed, he doubted he could have held on as Zhenya had.

As he continued his introspection, shapes appeared in the distance—some sort of flying machines. They were hidden in the darkness with their lights off, but Taekjoo caught faint flashes that gave them away.

He put on specialized goggles to get a clearer view. Judging by their outlines, they were military helicopters. Two of them, heading straight for Ajinoki.

Taekjoo increased his speed, closing the gap between himself and the helicopters. They noticed his approach and veered to the sides, seemingly hesitant to attack the bright pink helicopter. Perhaps they assumed it belonged to Olga. Shortly after, a message crackled over the radio:

"A military operation is in progress. Rear helicopter, identify yourself and state your destination."

Taekjoo ignored the message. If he started explaining, they might try to confirm if Olga was really aboard, and if they discovered she wasn't, they'd likely open fire immediately.

"I repeat. This is a military operation. Rear helicopter, identify yourself and state your destination. Non-compliance will result in engagement."

The warning grew sharper, and one of the helicopters swung around to block his path while the other fell in behind him. It was clear they were ready to attack at the slightest provocation.

Taekjoo recalled his conversation with Olga when she handed him the helicopter keys:

"A pink helicopter? Are you serious?"

"Why, does it look that bad? All these other helicopters are so ugly."

"If you paint stripes on an ugly pumpkin, does it become a watermelon?"

"You think you're so smart! This helicopter's dangerous, by the way. Insult a woman, and she'll pay you back triple. So don't even think about letting her down!" she had said with a playful smile, handing him the keys.

Just as Olga had claimed, this helicopter was more than just a vehicle. It was outfitted with missiles usually reserved for military models.

Without hesitation, Taekjoo fired a missile ahead and switched to emergency flight mode, rapidly dropping in altitude. The lead helicopter jolted violently from the sudden attack. The trailing helicopter accelerated, opening fire. Minigun rounds struck the windshield, scattering flashes of light across the cockpit.

Taekjoo jerked the controls upward, trying to gain altitude while surging forward at full speed. He aimed straight for the lead helicopter, which was still recovering from the explosion. The gap between them closed quickly, and the bullets from the pursuing helicopter began hitting the lead one as well. Amid the chaos, the pilots' faces became visible through the shattered, trembling glass.

"Damn it! Let's see who dies first!" Taekjoo shouted.

He charged recklessly, ready to collide, but pulled up at the last second. The pursuing helicopter also ascended sharply, but its delay caused its rotors to clip the landing gear of the lead helicopter. The blades shattered, and the aircraft began plummeting toward the dark ocean below. Taekjoo watched as the soldiers bailed out, one by one, opening their parachutes.

By the time the rear helicopter stabilized, Taekjoo's pink machine was already bearing down on it. He smiled at the enemy pilots, mouthing a silent farewell. A second later, the final missile streaked toward the helicopter and struck its mark. The resulting explosion lit up the sky, scattering debris into the sea. Parachutes half-deployed as the wreckage fell, mingling with a shattered yacht adrift in the chaos.

“Phew…”

Taekjoo exhaled, patting the helicopter as if praising it.

“Well done.”

He said, though the aircraft was riddled with bullet holes. Spiderweb cracks spread across the windshield, and wind whistled through gaps in the fuselage. No matter how tightly Taekjoo gripped the controls, the helicopter shuddered and swayed. The rotors, too, spun unevenly, emitting a faint rattling sound. Looking up, Taekjoo noticed some blades had been damaged by the minigun fire, appearing almost “rusted.” He silently thanked his luck that the fuel tank hadn’t been hit.

Though he had fought like a pilot in a fighter jet, this was still a helicopter. His tactics had worked, but the situation was extremely precarious. Taekjoo wondered if he could even make it to Ajinoki in one piece.

As his perilous flight continued, Kwon Taekjoo finally spotted an island in the distance. Based on its location and shape, it was unmistakably Ajinoki. Yet, for some reason, there were no lights to be seen. Not even the mansion was illuminated. Had the Russian government cut the electricity? Or had Zhenya turned off all the lights deliberately, hiding and watching? Perhaps he was in such a desperate situation that turning on the lights was simply out of the question.

"Why are you trying to leave? It's not like I'm going to kill you."

Suddenly, Kwon Taekjoo remembered the time Zhenya had tried to stop him from leaving. Back then, even Zhenya didn’t seem to understand why he wanted so badly for Taekjoo to stay or why Taekjoo kept trying to leave. With desperation etched on his face, Zhenya couldn’t even articulate that all he wanted was for Taekjoo to stay by his side—that he only needed his presence.

"In truth, I was waiting the whole time, testing my patience with every passing minute."

Zhenya had endured countless dangers and loneliness since childhood. And now, he claimed he had been waiting for Kwon Taekjoo to rescue him. Zhenya had admitted that this was the first time he had ever placed his hopes in Taekjoo—something he hadn’t even done for his parents or loved ones. Yet Kwon Taekjoo had abandoned him in such a perilous place. Zhenya had pleaded with him, called out his name, but Taekjoo had turned his back on him.

“Zhenya…” Taekjoo murmured softly.

He pushed the throttle to its limit. The helicopter lurched forward, the flight so unstable it seemed as though it might crash at any moment. The island loomed closer.

Anti-air missiles mounted on the rocky cliffs quickly locked onto the intruder. It was a defensive system impenetrable even to fighter jets. Attempting to breach it with an ordinary helicopter was akin to diving headfirst into a volcano. But Taekjoo had no other choice.

He barely dodged the first missile that shot toward him, only to have another one rapidly follow. His breathing was labored as he maneuvered through relentless attacks. The problem was, these missiles didn't just vanish when they missed; they adjusted their trajectory in real time, pursuing their target until it was destroyed or they detonated.

Kwon Taekjoo was forced to retreat beyond the island's defensive perimeter. The helicopter plummeted sharply, its landing gear nearly skimming the water's surface. At the last second, he yanked the controls upward, causing the missiles to crash into the sea. The battered helicopter bounced off the water like a skipping stone, its power nearly depleted. When it finally rose back into the air, its speed had dropped significantly.

"Damn it, look at this!" Taekjoo shouted in frustration.

But as soon as he approached the island again, dozens more missiles launched. Watching the swarm of rockets closing in, Taekjoo quickly turned on the helicopter's spotlight, sending out Morse code signals in a desperate attempt to catch Zhenya's attention. Somewhere, somehow, he hoped Zhenya would see and understand.

The missiles were already closing in. Taekjoo pulled hard on the controls.

"Damn it…!" he screamed.

But the helicopter no longer responded. The fuel warning lights on the instrument panel flashed insistently. Having flown nonstop from the outskirts of Moscow to the far reaches of Siberia, the fuel reserves were nearly empty.

Dodging the missiles was no longer an option. Despair consumed him, and his body tensed as he faced the inevitable.

"Zhenyaaa!" he cried out, directing his voice toward the darkened mansion ahead.

A split second later, the missiles struck the helicopter. It erupted in a deafening explosion, flames engulfing the shattered remains as they plummeted into the cold, dark sea below.

Zhenya.

Someone was calling his name. He opened his eyes. He looked around, but all he saw was impenetrable darkness. Perhaps it was just a trick of his ears. Despite his doubts, he took a deep breath. The air smelled only of gunpowder—nothing else.

He was dreaming again. Lately, his dreams had become recurring, always featuring Kwon Taekjoo. Sometimes, Taekjoo would come to save six-year-old Zhenya; other times, his face full of hatred, he would leave, abandoning him. Every time Zhenya tried to reach for him, he'd wake up to cold silence, utterly alone.

He clenched his fists. Maybe he shouldn't have let Taekjoo leave. Maybe he needed to catch up to him and bring him back. His thoughts spiraled, unable to find peace.

And then, the alarm sounded. The Kremlin had sent someone after him again. He stood and walked to the window. Pulling the curtains aside, he saw the lights of a helicopter approaching the island. Something was wrong—this helicopter was smaller and looked different from military models.

He grabbed his binoculars and examined the helicopter again. It was an attack helicopter armed with missiles, but it was definitely not military. Its exterior appeared to be pink. Could it be Olga?

Even so, Zhenya wasn't about to disable the defense system. Olga surely knew what happened to those who tried to infiltrate Ajinoki. If she still chose to come closer, it would serve as a lesson—no one was an exception. Besides, it wasn't certain Olga was actually on that helicopter, so caution was necessary.

As Zhenya continued observing, he suddenly frowned. The helicopter's spotlight was flickering strangely. Was it a malfunction, or was it sending some kind of signal? The flashes looked very much like Morse code.

"Zhenya..."

A thought crossed his mind.

He began deciphering the Morse signals. It was odd—Olga didn't know Morse code, nor did she call him by his nickname.

As he read the blinking signal, his face slowly turned pale. The message tightened around his chest like a vice.

"I've come to get you."

"Taekjoo…?"

There was only one person in the world who would say something like that to him. Zhenya froze for a moment, then fear gripped him. He realized he had to disable the defense system immediately. Dropping the binoculars, he sprinted toward the underground command center. While he ran, the system had already started to engage, and he frantically tried to shut it down.

However, he couldn't stop the missiles that had already been launched. Just as he deactivated the system, a massive explosion erupted. When he opened the window and looked outside, he saw no sign of the helicopter lights. Instead, the fiery image of an explosion lit up the black night sky. The burning debris of the helicopter rained mercilessly into the gorge beyond the mountains.

"No…"

A low moan escaped his wide-open mouth. His eyes, stretched wide in shock, did not blink. He stood frozen, unable to move. A second later, he sprang to his feet and dashed across the moor. The distance to the gorge where the helicopter had crashed was too far to cover on

foot. But he ran blindly, not stopping. His blue eyes, darkened with despair, narrowed with effort. Everything around him vanished, leaving only one thought in his mind.

Kwon Taekjoo had come back.

That certainty grew stronger with each step, morphing into a suffocating despair. He hadn't recognized him. He hadn't realized that Taekjoo had finally returned for him—and he had shot him down mercilessly.

Could Kwon Taekjoo have survived? Could he call his name again, like he used to?

Zhenya ran across the silent plain and passed through a birch grove, where his sudden presence startled the nocturnal animals. Deer grazing under the moonlight watched his figure in alarm, as if petrified by fear. The ever-distant moon and the still forest seemed cruel in that moment.

"Haa... Haa…"

Gasping for air, he finally reached the island's edge. Peering down into the deep gorge, he saw a heap of metal—likely the remains of the helicopter. It was charred and smashed beyond recognition. It was impossible to tell if anyone had survived. Even the integrity of the body was doubtful.

"Taekjoo…"

He barely whispered, his voice faint. Then, he began to search. He handled the still-hot debris with his bare hands and slid down the steep slopes, searching everywhere. But there was no sign of Taekjoo—not even a trace.

"Taekjoo!"

He shouted desperately, his voice echoing through the vast gorge.

"Answer me, Taekjoo!"

Again and again, he called his name, wandering through the immense ravine. The darkness and silence, once so familiar to him, now felt unbearable. He felt like a lost child, not knowing where to go or where to look for Kwon Taekjoo.

Did he really… end Kwon Taekjoo with his own hands? Has he erased him from this world forever?"

"Taekjoooo!"

Zhenya called out his name repeatedly, as if desperately trying to deny the reality before him. He couldn't accept losing him so suddenly, so senselessly. He couldn't allow Taekjoo to leave his side so recklessly, so selfishly.

"...!"

How long had he wandered? Suddenly, something caught Zhenya's eye. A black object dangled from a long tree branch jutting out beneath the cliff.

It was a backpack. Taekjoo's backpack. Plain black with no distinguishing features—except for a badge carelessly pinned to it, unmistakably marking its owner.

Zhenya froze, staring blankly at the sight before him, and then collapsed to his knees. The realization hit him like a tidal wave. In the end, he had destroyed Kwon Taekjoo. He had obliterated him with his own hands.

"Don't worry. The only time I won't be by your side is when you're no longer in this world."

There was no reason to go on living anymore. He couldn't bear the thought of spending the rest of his days drowning in emptiness and loss. Zhenya reached into his coat and pulled out a handgun. Without hesitation, he pressed it against his temple.

He was ready to pull the trigger without a second thought.

"Zhenya."

Just as he was about to pull the trigger, he suddenly heard a voice.

The voice called his name again, coming from somewhere nearby. He turned sharply, but there was no one in sight. Wildly anxious, he began scanning the area, looking for the faintest clue. Finally, on the crest of a hill, he saw a scrap of pink fabric fluttering in the wind. A parachute.

He bolted toward it. It felt as though if he hesitated even a second, the vision would vanish. He ran, paying no attention to how often he stumbled or fell. It didn't matter.

"Haa, haa…" he gasped as he reached the parachute, his lungs burning from the effort.

Part of the parachute was tangled in the branches, the rest floating on the lake's surface. It looked bad. Without a second thought, he plunged into the water, desperately searching through the parachute. Diving into the dark depths, he finally touched something—a body. He began tearing at the cords and fabric of the parachute.

Underneath, he found Kwon Taekjoo. It seemed he hadn't managed to open the parachute in time.

Zhenya clung tightly to Kwon Taekjoo's lifeless body. He wasn't responding. His body was ice cold. Zhenya pressed his ear to his nose, listening for breath. Nothing. Then he pressed his ear to his chest. Not a single heartbeat. Stripping off his own wet clothes, he frantically began rubbing Taekjoo's cold skin. There was still warmth—his heart had only recently stopped.

"Taekjoo, wake up," Zhenya whispered, gently stroking his cheeks. No response. Time was slipping away. He had to save him.

He laid Kwon Taekjoo on the ground beside the lake and began performing CPR. His compressions forced Taekjoo's chest to rise, but he remained unconscious. Pinching his nose, Zhenya blew air into his lungs again and again, fighting to bring him back. Sweat poured from his brow as he worked.

He continued massaging Taekjoo's heart, administering CPR, and rubbing his body to keep him warm. But Taekjoo wasn't waking up, and panic began to creep in. Every minute, every second felt like an eternity. Killing a man was so easy. Bringing him back to life was excruciatingly hard.

"Taekjoo, please wake up," Zhenya pleaded, striking his chest in desperation. Then, suddenly, something under his left arm twitched. Taekjoo's body jerked violently.

"Ugh…" Kwon Taekjoo coughed, water spewing from his mouth as he rolled onto his side, struggling to breathe. Zhenya immediately opened his mouth, clearing his airway.

Taekjoo lay weakly on the ground after coughing up the last of the water. He was exhausted, but he was breathing.

"Damn it, I almost died," he muttered, panting.

"Taekjoo…" Zhenya, still unable to believe what he was seeing, rushed to him and wrapped his arms around him. Kwon Taekjoo, barely recovered, found his lungs crushed again and nearly choked.

"Hey, let go of me," Taekjoo wheezed. *"You're seriously going to kill me, you idiot."*

"Taekjoo, Taekjoo…" Zhenya repeated his name over and over, cradling his face in his hands as if afraid of hurting him.

His large, pale hands trembled so violently that it seemed entirely out of character for him. Zhenya's wide eyes betrayed his shock at this unexpected turn of events.

"What kind of relationship is this?" Taekjoo grumbled irritably, his eyes burning with frustration. *"Every day, it's a life-or-death chase, running and falling. People say relationships make the air sweeter, but between us, all I smell is gunpowder!"*

Kwon Taekjoo's scowl deepened as he grabbed Zhenya's collar and yanked him closer.

"I told you not to give up on me, you bastard!" he snapped.

"…Taekjoo?" Zhenya's voice was soft, uncertain.

"I don't want you to leave me."

There was a look of confusion in Zhenya's blue eyes. It wasn't surprising; he had never once thought of leaving Taekjoo. He had only believed Taekjoo needed time, and without fully understanding, Zhenya had chosen to wait. He had waited patiently for Kwon Taekjoo to come back for him. Even when his patience wore thin and he sometimes wanted to end it all,

he held himself back. More than anything, Zhenya didn't want Kwon Taekjoo to hate him again.

But instead of appreciating this, Taekjoo was furious—furious that Zhenya had abandoned him. He'd been angry before, for being chased, then for being controlled, and now, when Zhenya had simply waited, he was still unhappy about it.

Perhaps even Kwon Taekjoo realized he was spouting nonsense, because when he noticed the bewilderment on Zhenya's face, he flushed slightly and muttered irritably:

"If this is what love is, then so be it."

Zhenya tilted his head, puzzled. It was so sudden that he didn't even register what Kwon Taekjoo had just said. He wasn't used to hearing such words from him.

"If this crap is love, then I love you, you bastard."

At those words, Zhenya's eyes widened even further. It was as though he had frozen, hearing something he never thought possible.

Kwon Taekjoo tugged him by the ear and kissed him. The soft sound of the kiss echoed in the stillness, and Kwon Taekjoo whispered again with a sigh, *"I love you."*

At that moment, Zhenya crumbled, pulling him into a tight embrace and returning the kiss passionately. As if trying to fill his lungs with Taekjoo's breath, Zhenya kissed him with an urgency that seemed to capture every fragment of air between them. They couldn't bear to separate, not even for a moment. Every kiss was desperate, searing with intensity.

In the dark, silent, gunpowder-scented world they had built together, they exchanged their truest feelings over and over again—words and actions heavier than any oath.

Their silhouettes, entwined as one, stumbled back toward the house. Kwon Taekjoo skillfully wrapped his legs around Zhenya's waist, and Zhenya, grinning, pressed him firmly against the wall. Trapped between Zhenya and the cold surface, Taekjoo grabbed a fistful of Zhenya's hair and crushed their lips together in a desperate kiss. They'd kissed so many times before, yet it was never enough. Their lips burned with lust, meeting over and over again in fervent passion.

Both tried to dominate the kiss, tongues pushing forward simultaneously, their battle devolving into chaotic laughter. Zhenya, flushed like an overly aroused teenager, stared at Taekjoo's amused face.

"...It's cold, you idiot," Taekjoo murmured, a weak hint to keep going. He tugged lightly on Zhenya's ear, and Zhenya wasted no time diving back in, his lips crashing down with such force that Taekjoo winced at the sting. Despite the pain, a faint smile tugged at Taekjoo's lips before he surrendered and returned the kiss. Zhenya's thick tongue delved deeper, sliding along Taekjoo's palate before teasing his throat. Zhenya pulled Taekjoo's chest closer to his

own, ignoring every reflex to retreat, kissing him with an intensity that felt like quenching an insatiable thirst.

Zhenya's lips and tongue moved greedily, as though trying to make up for lost time. A soft moan escaped Taekjoo when Zhenya released him momentarily, only to plunge back in without mercy.

Taekjoo's tongue brushed against Zhenya's sharp teeth, their breaths mingling in heated bursts. The kiss felt like a complaint—Zhenya's way of pouring out the frustration of all he'd endured, consuming and draining Taekjoo's strength with relentless passion.

Shivering in his damp clothes, Taekjoo clung to Zhenya, who eagerly led him to the stove. As Zhenya gently lowered Taekjoo onto the fur-lined floor, a shudder ran through him, drawing a faint gasp from his lips. Zhenya knelt beside him, stripping away the wet fabric with little care, focused entirely on raising Taekjoo's body temperature.

Taekjoo, half-dazed and clinging to Zhenya, accepted his tender kisses without resistance. Zhenya stripped off his own clothes, wrapping them around Taekjoo's chilled body, his hands rubbing briskly against his icy skin to create warmth.

But it wasn't enough. The heat still wasn't returning. Zhenya stood, intent on rekindling the fire in the stove. Yet when he tried to move, Taekjoo's hand shot up, grabbing his neck to pull him back, his gaze clouded with desperation as if asking him to keep on kissing him. His usual sharp eyes now soft and unfocused. When Zhenya brushed his cold cheek, Taekjoo let out a quiet whimper.

"Just a moment, Taekjoo."

Zhenya soothed, caressing his cheek as he relit the fire. The flames crackled to life, the warmth spreading quickly through the room and easing the tension in Taekjoo's trembling body.

Still shivering slightly, Zhenya left for a moment to retrieve a thick blanket and a bottle of vodka from the living room. Returning, he took a swig from the bottle before leaning over Taekjoo, pouring a small amount into his mouth through a shared kiss.

Taekjoo drank greedily, like a man discovering water in a desert. When the alcohol burned his throat, he coughed lightly.

"Cough…"

As their lips parted, Zhenya ran his tongue across Taekjoo's damp lips and cheek, then seized his face again for another deep kiss. Zhenya's tongue wrestled with Taekjoo's, pulling and sucking insistently as though they were claiming each other. Their kisses grew fiercer, more urgent, as if they were hunters locking horns in a battle of wills, biting lips and tangling tongues in a frenzy.

In brief moments when their lips broke apart, their mouths sought each other's faces—cheeks, jaws, ears—eager to make up for every lost second, savoring the intimacy with

relentless need. But the more they touched, the more their desire seemed to grow.

When Taekjoo's body made contact with the floor, a shiver ran through him. The surface was still cold, and goosebumps rose on his damp skin, his lips tinged blue.

"Are you cold, Taekjoo?"

Zhenya whispered against his ear, inhaling the faint scent of him. Taekjoo clung to his head, whispering hoarsely.

"I'll freeze to death if you don't warm me up."

Before Zhenya could respond, Taekjoo's hands fumbled for the zipper of his pants. Zhenya pulled back with a teasing smirk, brushing his hand along Taekjoo's arm, then leaned down to bite gently at his neck. Taekjoo groaned softly at the unexpected playfulness, his body instinctively responding to Zhenya's touch.

Zhenya pressed his lips to the flushed skin of Taekjoo's neck, tugging his shirt up to his shoulders and mussing his hair in the process. He buried his face in the disheveled locks, inhaling deeply.

"That tickles, damn it."

Taekjoo laughed weakly, turning his face away. But Zhenya caught his wrist, licking his palm without hesitation. The sensation was both ticklish and oddly provocative, making Taekjoo's face scrunch in response. Zhenya slid Taekjoo's fingers into his mouth, sucking on them with deliberate care, while his other hand pressed firmly against Taekjoo's chest. The skin beneath his touch paled momentarily before regaining its color, Zhenya's grip leaving faint red marks behind.

"Ow, that hurts."

"It seems your nipples has gone stiff from neglect."

"Neglect? What the hell—"

Taekjoo started to protest, but his words were cut off as Zhenya suddenly bit down on his right nipple. Warm, wet lips pressed insistently against the sensitive skin, Zhenya's tongue applying firm pressure. Taekjoo's hips bucked involuntarily at the sensation.

As Zhenya began to tease his other nipple, Taekjoo couldn't suppress a low moan.

"Ahh…"

Zhenya smirked at his reaction, his lips closing around the sensitive peaks, his tongue and fingers working in unison to draw more shuddering responses. The tingling warmth spread from Taekjoo's chest to his stomach, tightening his core. Clenching his thighs, Taekjoo straddled Zhenya's waist, silently pleading for more.

"They're flat, so hard to suck," Zhenya said mockingly.

“Nonsense... That's enough, stop it... Oh!”

Kwon Taekjoo tried to protest, but his body was drawn to Zhenya. He toyed with both of his nipples with his tongue, leaving no chance to resist, making Taekjoo shudder with pleasure.

Zhenya watched Kwon Taekjoo's facial expression closely, seeing his cheeks and ears gradually turn pink with arousal. Pulling away from one side of his chest, he ran his tongue down the other side while simultaneously slipping his hand inside Taekjoo's pants. The belt was unbuckled with a loud sound, and Zhenya began to stroke his cock gently but with confidence.

“Ha.. Oh.”

Zhenya continued without pause, savoring Taekjoo’s every soft gasp and moan as he explored his body, coaxing warmth and desire back into every chilled corner. Taekjoo’s voice trembled as he responded to each touch, the sweet sound filling the room like music.

Zhenya gently stroked his aroused cock between thumb and forefinger, occasionally caressing the head. Each time he did so, Kwon Taekjoo raised his hips sharply, his body reacting to the slightest touch. And when Zhenya flicked his nipples again with his tongue, Kwon Taekjoo involuntarily squirmed and let out languid moans.

“Ah... Ugh...”

“So, Taekjoo.... Do you like it?”

“Stop it... Hurry up... Oh!”

Kwon Taekjoo barely had time to utter a word before Zhenya abruptly pulled away, halting all caresses. His cock twitched at the sudden pause, his body seeking to continue the pleasure.

“What are you doing?”

Kwon Taekjoo struggled to speak, squeezing Zhenya's shoulder.

“Don't rush, Taekjoo. The night is young.”

Zhenya replied, licking his lips. Suddenly, he lifted Kwon Taekjoo's legs, pressing them against his chest. Kwon Taekjoo's face flushed red, his breathing became ragged and his body trembled with anticipation.

Zhenya, holding Kwon Taekjoo's knees with one hand, began to explore Taekjoo's ass cheeks. His fingers gently stroked the sensitive skin surrounding his asshole, causing it to tingle slightly. His hand then moved down to his scrotum, kneading it slightly, before stroking his cock upward. Kwon Taekjoo involuntarily jerked his legs from the tickling, and his nipples rubbed against his lap, causing new flares of arousal.

“Hmm...”

Zhenya pushed Kwon Taekjoo's legs further apart, pressing his chest against his knees. He probed his anus with the tip of his tongue, gently running over every curve of his skin, then made soft sounds as he pulled the tender flesh in with his lips. The thin skin rose and fell under his mouth as he slowly relaxed the taut muscles. From time to time, Zhenya would push the tip of his tongue deeper, breaking down the last barriers of resistance. Kwon Taekjoo gritted his teeth, feeling the sensitive spot moisten and slip through his saliva.

“Ah... mm.... oh....”

His attempts to hold back turned into involuntary moans. Taekjoo was torn between wanting Zhenya to stop and wanting him to intensify his efforts. His trembling hands reached for Zhenya, grabbing his arm. Kwon Taekjoo pleaded, his voice trembling.

"Zhenya, hurry... please, just hurry..."

"Oh, Taekjoo, why the rush?"

Zhenya teased, his smile curling mischievously. Kwon Taekjoo murmured, barely masking his frustration.

"Stop making me want... more.”

"That's just who you are."

Zhenya replied smoothly, his eyes narrowing in a playful, knowing grin. Zhenya then gave himself completely to his desire, encircling Taekjoo, who pressed him against him so tightly as if he was never going to let go again. He gently bit Taekjoo's earlobe while pushing his fingers simultaneously into Taekjoo's relaxed asshole. Taekjoo's body shuddered at the unexpected intrusion. To distract him, Zhenya slid his tongue into his ear, causing him to tense his neck and hold his breath. Taking advantage of the moment, Zhenya continued to explore his hole with his fingers, softening it from the inside out.

The leathery tissues around his fingers seemed warmer than usual, as if Kwon Taekjoo's body was trying to compensate for the loss of heat.

“Zhenya Zhenya...”

Taekjoo gasped, gripping his hair with his fist. Zhenya felt his limits approaching as well. He pressed Taekjoo's hands to the ground and roughly pulled his hips back. Unzipping his pants, he released his tense, aroused cock, which came out dripping with precum. He pressed it against Kwon-Taekjoo's body and began to rub it gently, causing him to become even more turned on. Kwon Taekjoo's hole also reacted to the stimulation as if it was glued to his cock, creating an arousing sensation.

“Calm down, Taekjoo.”

Zhenya whispered on and off, trying to catch his breath. Strained veins ran up his forehead and chin. He gripped his cock, guiding it to the entrance of Taekjoo's asshole. The spot that had been relaxed a moment ago immediately tightened and squeezed.

“Ah...”

“Relax. Come on, relax.”

Zhenya said softly, lightly patting his ass cheeks. Kwon Taekjoo's body responded with a brief relaxation, and at that moment, Zhenya roughly thrust his cock in.

The hole was instantly expanded to its limit and its inner walls closed around the cock. Zhenya, heedless of this, began to slowly widen the opening, rhythmically moving his hips. The flesh enveloping his cock filled the emptiness of Kwon Taekjoo's stomach, who held back moans as he gritted his teeth. His face grew redder and redder, as if he was trying not to breathe.

“Ha, Taekjoo, you're going to burst like this. Don't you even want to breathe?”

Zhenya teased softly, thrusting deeper again. The tense inner muscles struggled to expand, letting his cock in, while Kwon Taekjoo's body was covered in sweat.

“Damn, how much longer?” growled Kwon Taekjoo, panting.

“We're only halfway there.”

Zhenya replied, slapping him lightly on his rear. The slap tingled slightly, leaving red marks on the skin of his hand. Kwon Taekjoo shook his head in irritation. Zhenya, stifling his protest with a kiss, continued to push his cock deeper and deeper into him, slowly but forcefully. The filling sensation in his belly and throat gradually increased. The pressure on Kwon Taekjoo's bent thighs became unbearable.

“Wait... my back...”

Taekjoo tried to stop him, but he suddenly jerked his head back. All at once, Zhenya thrust in deeply, pushing in until he completely filled his hole, pressing himself on top of him. Taekjoo felt as if his back was about to split in two.

“Ha...”

“What did you say?”

Zhenya asked with a smile, still moving inside him. The cock inside Taekjoo was gyrating and clawing at the sensitive mucous membrane. It was going in so deep that Kwon Taekjoo found it hard to breathe.

“Shit, you'd better hurry up...”

“Whatever you say.”

Zhenya replied, a faint smirk on his lips. He increased the pace, abruptly pulling his cock almost all the way out and ramming it all the way in again. Every thrust of his hips brought a fresh rush of sharp pleasure, his knees pressing against Taekjoo's chest and brushing over his

nipples. The uncomfortable ache in his back mixed with the waves of pleasure that came from his chest and stomach.

“Ah! Damn it!”

Kwon Taekjoo cried out, remembering how many times he and Zhenya had made passionate love, regardless of time and place. It seemed they were always like wild animals, unable to stay away from each other. But despite all those memories, his body had never gotten used to the feelings Zhenya gave him every time they had sex.

“Shit...”

He exhaled, feeling like his stomach was about to burst with fullness.

Panting, Zhenya watched Kwon Taekjoo's reactions closely, memorizing his every facial expression, trying to catch the slightest sign of pleasure on his contorted face. Each time his cock went in deeper, the walls of his hole swelled and warmed up more. When he reached his core, Kwon Taekjoo's muscles began to contract, as if they didn't want to let him go.

Although Zhenya tried to ignore it, she couldn't help herself and concentrated more and more on giving Kwon Taekjoo as much pleasure as possible. At one point, when he hit the right spot, he felt Kwon Taekjoo's body shudder with a sudden jolt of electricity.

Taekjoo shrieked and opened his eyes wide, looking fearfully at Zhenya. Zhenya caught his gaze and pulled his legs roughly, lifting them so that Taekjoo's thighs were in the air and he was almost dangling, leaning on his hands.

“Don't... don't do this now...”

Taekjoo gasped, trying to stop Zhenya, but his pleas were useless. Zhenya grabbed his ankles, pulled them over his shoulders and continued to fuck him at an unthinkable speed, not sparing Taekjoo's sensitive spots.

A deep sense of pleasure emanating from within him hit him squarely in the head. A surge of pleasure mixed with pain washed over him, preventing him from concentrating. Taekjoo's hands holding his body trembled and his face, relaxed by pleasure, became distorted by the sweet pain that seemed to awaken every cell in his body. A trickle of drool ran down his chin.

“Shit, ahh, mmm, mmm, ahh, ahh....”

“Taekjoo, you like it here, don't you?”

“Ah, just a little...slower...ah, not so fast....”

His mind disappeared completely, leaving him prey only to those chaotic, agonizing feelings. His head was spinning, yellow and white spots flashed before his eyes. The feel of the shocks starting in the pit of his stomach built up inside his cock and hit his spine, making his body flush hotly.

Zhenya watched as Kwon Taekjoo collapsed under the effects of pleasure. He was dizzy from the lack of oxygen, his mind clouded, giving way to pure carnal passion.

With each thrust, their bodies grew wetter and wetter. No trace of Taekjoo's earlier resistance remained; his body enveloped his cock, inviting him to fuck Taekjoo deeper. If Zhenya tried to pull away, his muscles clenched as if unwilling to let go.

Zhenya quickened his movements, not sparing Taekjoo's inner muscles. His hips clashed with heavy thrusts, producing slapping noises. The red flesh surrounding Zhenya's cock pulled outward and retracted again with each movement.

Then, Zhenya rammed his cock all the way in, making Taekjoo's whole body shudder with the impact. His spine shuddered as if an electric shock ran through it. His whole body tensed and his back arched in the air from the powerful sensation.

“Ahhhhhh!!!”

“Taekjoo!”

Zhenya said to him in a low voice. Taekjoo barely looked at him. As soon as their gazes met, Zhenya thrust into him again in the same place, making him moan.

"Taekjoo!"

Zhenya called out again, his voice firm, as if reminding him who was the source of this unbearable pleasure.

"Taekjoo, my little one.”

He added, his tone now filled with a deep tenderness.

Kwon Taekjoo gritted his teeth and his body began to shudder convulsively. His cock trembled, spurting out thick ropes of semen that splashed across his face, chest, and stomach.

“Ha... Hah...”

Zhenya gently rolled him onto his stomach, pinning him to the floor. Taekjoo's body finally found balance and rubbed weakly against the fur underneath, trying to find some relief. Zhenya lay down on top of him, straddling his waist, and pushed his cock back in, pressing gently against his thighs.

“Ah...”

“Taekjoo.”

Zhenya whispered again, pressing his lips against Taekjoo's hair, ears and shoulders. Slowly, almost gently, he began to enter, his cock sliding effortlessly inside, as if the opening was made just for him.

“Ah...”

“So good Taekjoo.”

Zhenya mused, burying his face in her thick hair while still moving smoothly and slowly. His cock moved languidly in and out, each movement touching the sensitive walls of Kwon Taekjoo's insides, triggering new explosions of pleasure. Gradually, his muscles began to tighten around Zhenya's cock, making each thrust even more feelable.

Although they were both used to the fast, passionate moments, sometimes these slow, sensual touches were just as satisfying.

“Haa, aaah....”

“Ah, haa Taekjoo.”

Their bodies came into contact, their moist skin slid against each other, their scents mingled. Their accelerated breathing sounded in his ears, and the brush of his eyelashes could be felt on his cheeks.

Kwon Taekjoo suddenly, moaning faintly, pulled Zhenya's face close and kissed him. Zhenya allowed him to do so, continuing downward, and soon they changed positions. Lying on their sides, facing each other, Kwon Taekjoo wrapped his thigh around Zhenya's waist. At that moment, after having been slowly moving, Zhenya roughly pushed his cock all the way in.

“Ah!

The unexpected strength of the penetration made Kwon Taekjoo's stomach bulge, and the hole that had been gently expanding and contracting before now stretched to its limit and quivered.

"Taekjoo, hold me," Zhenya whispered, brushing a kiss along his sharp jawline.

"Damn it, you always get so clingy at times like this..."

"Yes, Taekjoo," Zhenya replied with a soft smile.

After several requests, Kwon Taekjoo clicked his tongue in irritation and pulled Zhenya toward him with a sharp tug. Zhenya instantly returned the embrace, his hands gripping Taekjoo's waist tightly. At that moment, Zhenya's cock, deeply buried in Kwon Taekjoo's stomach, popped out, leaving only the head still inside, preventing him from feeling complete relief.

Just as the muscles inside were beginning to feel empty, Zhenya's cock slid in again, ramming in at different angles and working its way messily. Kwon Taekjoo tried to cling to Zhenya by hugging him tighter, but in the end he only let out a long moan.

“Ah! Haa, ha...”

“Taekjoo...”

Zhenya whispered without stopping his thrusting. While Kwon Taekjoo moaned in pleasure, Zhenya changed their positions again while still moving. When Taekjoo woke up, he was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling, with Zhenya on top of him. Zhenya wrapped his arms around his shoulders, pinning Kwon Taekjoo's body, and began to move his hips sharply again. With each thrust, his lower body flew through the air and then fell under his weight, each time feeling Zhenya's cock penetrate deeper.

Kwon Taekjoo's cock, which had already come once, was once again at full throttle. The red, throbbing body of his twitched with Zhenya's thrusts. Heat filled his thighs and everything around him throbbed with tension.

“Slow down, ah, please slow down!”

Kwon Taekjoo pleaded, smacking at Zhenya's hard thighs. But Zhenya, with his head sunk on Kwon Taekjoo's shoulder, continued to thrust mercilessly. His labored breathing and grunts echoed throughout the room. His wet skin produced sticky noises and Kwon Taekjoo's eyes began to turn white.

Suddenly, Zhenya pounced on Kwon Taekjoo with a roar, slamming his hips with his pelvis. Then, not satisfied, he kept moving, squirting his thick semen deep inside the Taekjoo's belly.

“Ah…”

Suddenly, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed Zhenya’s hair, his body twisting mid-air as tremors coursed through him. Every inch of him became hyper-sensitive, as though all his nerves had been sharpened. The tips of his fingers and toes tingled, as if drawn to a razor’s edge. However, his cock was unable to ejaculate anything else.

"Taekjoo, are you done?"

"Ah…"

Kwon Taekjoo collapsed onto Zhenya, drained of strength, and sobbed quietly for a long while. Zhenya wrapped him in a gentle embrace, kissing his trembling body along his neck and shoulders. The shaking gradually subsided.

Exhausted, overwhelmed by complete fatigue, Taekjoo timidly brushed his hand against Zhenya’s face. Zhenya tilted his head slightly, letting Taekjoo’s hand glide softly over his skin, then began kissing his fingers one by one.

When Taekjoo leaned his forehead slightly forward to touch Zhenya’s, Zhenya noticed and leaned in for a kiss. Their lips barely grazed before parting due to the angle. Zhenya seemed a little disappointed, his gaze lingering on Taekjoo’s eyes, an unusual longing flickering in his blue depths.

The corners of Zhenya’s lips twitched slightly in a peculiar way. Kwon Taekjoo touched Zhenya’s nose with a small smile.

"Were you feeling lonely?"

"...Lonely?"

"Were you bored? Did you miss your hyung?"

"Seeing you is something that's always out of reach."

"You see, I still have so much to teach you."

Taekjoo said, shaking his head. He rolled slowly onto his side, still lying over Zhenya, their bodies remaining close, warm, and connected. Zhenya's cock, which was still inside, slipped out and his thick semen came out slowly.

The sensation made Kwon Taekjoo grimace and open his eyes, locking his gaze on Zhenya. When he said, “Ah,” Zhenya looked at him with a puzzled expression. Taekjoo repeated, “Ah,” and touched his lip with his thumb. Only then did Zhenya part his lips, and Taekjoo, straddling his neck, leaned down slowly to kiss him. His tongue slid into Zhenya’s mouth, intertwining with his damp tongue in a raw, passionate kiss.

Zhenya let out a soft moan, his lips trembling with pleasure. Taekjoo felt a wave of heat, even his ears burning with the overwhelming sensation of control and desire.

Their kiss broke for a brief moment, only to resume with renewed fervor. Their bodies moved in perfect harmony, each touch and motion blending seamlessly.

After some time, Taekjoo pulled away, but Zhenya instinctively followed, trying to capture his lips again. Taekjoo pinched Zhenya’s lips lightly, scolding him.

“You didn’t even light the fire. There’s no smell of food in the house. Are you insane? Were you planning to freeze to death?”

“Freeze to death? Over something as minor as the cold? People can survive days without food.”

“Crazy bastard. Do you think being called a monster means you’re actually some kind of ghost? You need to keep your body warm.”

“Why are you suddenly upset?”

“I’m not upset, I’m worried about you.”

Taekjoo retorted, glaring at him with disapproval. Even when his concern for Zhenya came across as anger, it wasn’t irritating—it carried a kind of undeniable compassion. Zhenya studied Taekjoo’s expression carefully before a quiet smile spread across his face. His long lashes lowered slightly as his eyes narrowed. He seemed to recognize the care and love shining in Taekjoo’s gaze.

“Taekjoo, I didn’t know you worried about me so much.”

Zhenya teased with a grin, suddenly grabbing Taekjoo’s ass. He kissed Taekjoo’s cheek and whispered.

“Yes, I was lonely.”

“You said you didn’t know what it meant to feel lonely.”

He grabbed Zhenya's hand in surprise, but Zhenya ignored him and continued to gently caress his ass cheeks. The fingers were barely touching it, but Taekjoo's hole had already relaxed and opened easily.

“I was cold and hungry.”

“Hey, you were what...?”

He tried to pull away from Zhenya's hand, but Zhenya had managed to grab him firmly earlier and pulled Taekjoo towards himself. Now their bodies were touching completely. Zhenya calmly spread Kwon Taekjoo's legs apart with his knee and began to slowly stroke his already aroused cock along the wet line of his ass. Then he straddled Taekjoo's hips, bringing them together, and pressed his lips against his neck.

“Feed me and keep me warm, Taekjoo.”

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Chapter End Notes

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In The End

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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After a few climaxes, Kwon Taekjoo was utterly drained. His consciousness flickered, fading in and out before plunging him into a void.

Meanwhile, Zhenya trailed soft kisses across his body, his lips brushing over every inch of Taekjoo's skin. Occasionally, he buried his face in Taekjoo's dark hair, inhaling his scent, as if confirming that Taekjoo was really there, resting peacefully.

Later, Zhenya brought over a blanket to cover him, though Taekjoo didn't sleep. As usual, he smoked a cigar, inspecting the wounds on his body and tending to them one by one.

When his eyes landed on the tattoo on the inside of Taekjoo's thigh, still intact, Zhenya leaned down without hesitation. He lingered there so long that the faint marks of his teeth surrounded the tattoo. A bruise would form over time.

The ticklish sensation made Taekjoo groan softly. Slowly opening his eyes, he murmured, *"Thirsty."*

As always, Zhenya turned to him and kissed him, transferring whiskey from his mouth to moisten Taekjoo's dry lips. It wasn't the first time Zhenya had given him alcohol or a cigar instead of water. By now, Taekjoo had grown used to it and was willing to drink whatever would quench his thirst. After Zhenya effectively got him tipsy with an entire glass in this manner, he handed him a cigar. Taekjoo accepted it, took a drag, and immediately coughed. It seemed like he hadn't smoked in a while; the smoke felt unusually harsh.

"How can you smoke such garbage?"

"You love it."

“Me?”

Taekjoo gave him a skeptical look, and Zhenya tilted his head slightly as if confused by the question.

“Since the day we met, you’ve always reacted to this smell.”

“That’s because that smell was there the moment I nearly died. And besides, you always appeared so quietly that the only thing that gave you away was that scent.”

Hearing this, Zhenya raised his chin slightly and let out a soft laugh.

“It’s funny how you make it sound so sweet.”

“What nonsense are you spouting now?”

“Every time you smelled it, your heart started racing because you knew I was near.”

Taekjoo wanted to argue that fear and anticipation were two different things, but he doubted Zhenya would take him seriously. That man always interpreted things in his own way.

“If you don’t like it, why keep smoking it? What’s the point?”

“I like it now. Since that moment.”

Zhenya’s answer was casual, but Taekjoo caught something romantic in it. It felt as if Zhenya kept those cigars around simply because they elicited a reaction from him. It was as though Zhenya wanted to hold his attention.

Whenever Taekjoo discovered tenderness in this man, all he could do was let out a heavy sigh.

“Hey, how could I just leave someone like you and go back to running errands?”

“Why bring this up out of nowhere?”

“I’ve been thinking about it for a long time. All my fears, all our arguments… they all boil down to one thing: I couldn’t give up my job.”

“But I told you I was willing to tolerate it.”

Zhenya interrupted, clearly not eager to revisit this topic.

“No. I can’t do it anymore.”

“What do you mean, ‘can’t’?”

Zhenya frowned, as though afraid Taekjoo was about to suggest breaking up again. Taekjoo sighed and ruffled Zhenya’s hair.

“I’m quitting my job.”

“What?”

“I don’t have a reason to hold onto it anymore. My mom’s worried about me, and if I can’t even protect the person I love, how can I protect a whole country?”

Taekjoo glanced at Zhenya, expecting him to be ecstatic, but Zhenya looked stunned, as though he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Why are you doing this all of a sudden?”

“Hey, idiot, what’s your problem? I’m saying I’m not going anywhere now, and I’m going to spend time with you. Isn’t that what you wanted? Or are you already bored of me?”

“Your job, your mom—these are things you always said you could never give up. You said you couldn’t live without them. And now, suddenly, you’re just leaving it all? What’s your angle? Do you want something else from me?”

“God, you have no faith in me.”

Taekjoo sighed, pinching Zhenya’s cheek. Even then, Zhenya continued to look at him with suspicion. Taekjoo grabbed the back of Zhenya’s head, pressing their foreheads together.

“Of course, how could someone so clueless understand the generosity of his hyung?”

“Taekjoo, what are you even saying?”

“All this time, you’ve put up with everything, so now it’s my turn. Now that I’m officially unemployed, I’m going to spend every moment with you until you get sick of me!”

Zhenya stared silently into Taekjoo's eyes, as if trying to determine whether he was attempting to deceive him or merely soothe him temporarily. His focused, serious gaze was so amusing that Taekjoo struggled to hold back a laugh.

"What? You don’t believe me? Do you need proof again?"

Taekjoo teased with a grin, taking Zhenya’s hand and placing it over his own chest. In response, Zhenya pressed firmly against Taekjoo’s chest and pulled him closer with all his strength. The pressure was so intense it felt like Taekjoo's chest might burst. Then, out of nowhere, Zhenya captured his lips in a kiss so overwhelming it left Taekjoo gasping for air.

“Hey, wait, mmm… I’m suffocating!”

Ignoring his protests, Zhenya grabbed Taekjoo’s face, tilted his head, and kissed him again. His cheeks were pinched, his lips swollen, and Zhenya leaned in further, pressing his tongue firmly against Taekjoo’s lips, covering them completely. Taekjoo’s already uneven breathing grew more chaotic under the warmth of Zhenya’s relentless kisses. His chest tightened, and he tried to fight back, hitting Zhenya’s arms and lifting his knees in resistance. It was all in vain. Like a machine, Zhenya continued to take what he wanted, immersed in his pleasure. His eyelashes quivered as his cheek brushed against Taekjoo’s.

Suddenly, Taekjoo's foot kicked the ice bucket, sending its contents clattering across the floor. Zhenya's attention snapped to the noise, and Taekjoo, sensing something ominous, shook his head furiously. A sly smile crept across Zhenya's face.

"Don't do it. I can't handle it."

"Handle what, exactly?"

"Don't do anything."

"Anything like what?"

Zhenya asked, feigning innocence, though the mischievous glint in his eyes said otherwise.

"Whatever you're thinking right now. Don't do it."

"But why not? You're the one who said you wanted to have fun."

With that, Zhenya grabbed one of the ice cubes that had rolled near him, spinning it in his fingers right in front of Taekjoo's face, his smile growing wider.

"What are you doing?"

Taekjoo asked again, his voice tinged with alarm, but Zhenya didn't stop.

"Hyung."

Taekjoo froze, stunned. Zhenya knew a few Korean words, and "hyung" was one of them. Taekjoo had previously doubted whether Zhenya fully understood the meaning of the word, but now he was certain. Zhenya seemed to use it as a term of endearment, much like how Taekjoo might affectionately call him "bastard." The look of surprise on Taekjoo's face only emboldened Zhenya further.

"Do you like it, hyung?"

"Damn it… stop that!"

"Stop what?"

"Just… stop everything! Don't do anything!"

"When you ask me not to do something, it makes me want to do it more."

Zhenya smiled, playing with the ice in his hands. Then he slowly touched Taekjoo's nipple, which was slightly bluish from the cold. The icy touch made Taekjoo shiver and grit his teeth, a shiver running through his body.

Taekjoo let out a strangled exhale.

"Look how much you're waiting for this."

Zhenya pressed hard on his swollen nipples with ice until they were flat. Taekjoo pulled away, trying to cope with the unusual sensation, but his body kept responding to every touch. Zhenya watched each reaction closely, moving the ice so hard that the nipples were almost pressed inward.

“Ahhh, that's weird, don't do that!”

“Weird, don't you like it?”

Zhenya replied with a giggle, withdrawing the ice from his chest, and Taekjoo's body shuddered again. The ice continued to slide downward, passing over his abs, leaving behind a cold, wet trail.

When the ice reached Taekjoo's groin, he screamed:

“Damn it, what are you doing, you psycho!”

“What, you're enjoying yourself, so I'm doing what I can for you as your lover.”

With a soft smile, Zhenya continued to slide the ice down his body, caressing his scrotum. The cold wetness, as it came in contact with the sensitive skin, aroused every nerve. Taekjoo tried his best to restrain himself, but a moan escaped his mouth.

“Ahh, enough...”

“Enough?”

Zhenya, after letting the ice melt a little, inserted it into Taekjoo's navel. The ice, like a jigsaw puzzle, fit perfectly into the hole, and a wave of cold spread through his body, reaching up to the nape of his neck.

Zhenya slowly tilted his head, his hair tickling Taekjoo's skin and his sharp nose pressing gently against his abdominal muscles. Zhenya then began to lick a piece of ice, lightly scratching his navel, causing a slight pain to mix with pleasure. Taekjoo shuddered at the new sensations, and his legs trembled involuntarily.

“Aah, stop...”

The ice melted quickly from the heat of their bodies and the touch of Zhenya's tongue. Moisture filled his navel, and every time Zhenya's tongue touched the inside, wet sounds could be heard. Zhenya kept insistently licking and rubbing the opening, creating an incessant surge of pleasure that spread down his stomach and pooled in his groin. Taekjoo was breathing agitatedly, moving his legs in an attempt to release the tension.

“Ahh, uh, stop...”

“Hm, Taekjoo, don't you like it? Do you really want me to stop?”

Zhenya lightly tapped his hardened cock. A drop of liquid from the tip of Taekjoo's cock splashed to the side. Zhenya smiled, stuck out his tongue and gently swiped it across his

mouth, making Taekjoo moan deeply again.

“Ahhhh...”

Taekjoo's cock throbbed in anticipation the new sensations. Zhenya slid a finger down his ass cheeks, brushing his wet hole, which was now ready for new touches. Looking at his face, Zhenya slowly opened his mouth to Taekjoo, who unable to bear it, raised himself up and shoved his cock into Zhenya's hot mouth, pulling his head towards him and pressing it against his groin.

The soft, smooth flesh completely enveloped his cock. Pleasure coursed through his entire body, bristling his hair and sending sharp shivers up his spine and into his brain. Taekjoo's asshole reflexively began to clench around Zhenya's finger.

Zhenya was about to start moving his finger inside more actively, but Taekjoo suddenly started bobbing Zhenya's head up and down forcefully, driving his cock deeper into his mouth. The cock roamed across the roof of his mouth and down his throat, slamming deep, so that the front of Zhenya's neck bulged visibly, reflecting the depth of the penetration. Out of reflex, Zhenya began to choke, his body tensed and he coughed, having to pull away. Taekjoo's precum hit his throat, sending him into an even worse coughing fit.

“Cough, cough… Wow, Taekjoo, you really can’t handle it, can you?”

“You did this on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Let’s take it slow. It’s a long night.”

“Take it slow? Are you serious? You’ve dragged me to this point, and now you want to slow down? You’ve been having all the fun you wanted all night!”

Taekjoo countered, his voice laced with frustration and heat. Ignoring his protests, Taekjoo suddenly pressed his saliva-slicked cock against Zhenya’s cheek in a forceful motion. His once sharp, piercing gaze was now hazy with desire. Running his tongue over his full lips, he smirked, his voice dripping with mischief as he commanded:

“Open your mouth, my pretty boy.”

Zhenya opened his eyes wide, but Taekjoo just gently ran his fingers over his ear. Zhenya smiled and obediently opened his mouth, sticking out his tongue. Taekjoo's cock slipped into his mouth, causing Zhenya's forehead to tighten slightly.

Despite this, Zhenya swallowed the cock firmly as it slid deeper into his throat. Occasionally he would tighten his lips and his throat, increasing the intensity of the sensation. Taekjoo grabbed his hair and, quickening his pace, began to move his hips, penetrating deeper. Zhenya responded by trying to increase the stimulation, sucking his cock and driving Taekjoo to greater ecstasy. His long fingers kept moving in and out of Taekjoo's asshole, finding sweet spots and stimulating them mercilessly. Taekjoo was completely engulfed in waves of pleasure, both outside and inside.

“Ahh, yes, damn, just like that...”

At the moment of climax, Taekjoo pressed his pelvis fully against Zhenya's face, his nose buried in his lower abdomen. At the same time, Zhenya squeezed Taekjoo's prostate with his fingers. Taekjoo's body shuddered in convulsions.

“Ahhhh, shit...”

Even his lips were trembling slightly from the tension. Zhenya could be heard gulping the cum coming out of Taekjoo's cock. Realizing what had happened, Taekjoo pulled away from Zhenya's shoulder with effort, trying to pull his cock out of his mouth.

“Don't you dare swallow that... Shit... Don't you dare...”

But Zhenya stubbornly held his hips and buttocks, pulling him closer. He deliberately dug his face into Taekjoo's groin, preventing him from escaping. Taekjoo, trembling with shame and embarrassment, quivered, unable to restrain himself.

Zhenya continued to hold him with his throat even after the flow of cum had dried up. With each squeeze, Taekjoo's asshole tightened around Zhenya's fingers, causing another burst of pleasure to course through his body. Exhausted and ashamed, Taekjoo just sighed heavily and looked at Zhenya.

Zhenya slowly released Taekjoo's cock, which was still glistening wet with saliva and other fluids, slightly flaccid from the orgasm. When Zhenya withdrew her fingers from his anus, the remnants of his semen flowed out, emptying his belly. Zhenya smeared it on Taekjoo's thighs with a smirk, to which Taekjoo grimaced and cursed.

“Shit... why did you swallow that!”

“You wanted me to be like a baby and you gave me your milk, didn't you?”

“Who said I treat you like a baby!”

“You always act like you don't understand.”

Zhenya smiled and straightened up. Taekjoo's body, which had been sitting on his chest, slid down helplessly. Zhenya unabashedly opened his asshole with two fingers-index and middle fingers -looked at the wet, shiny flesh and licked.

“Shit. Stop it. I really could die from too much sex.”

“How long do you think I've put up with this? It's still a long way off, Taekjoo.”

“But I already said I won't leave. We have plenty of time.”

Despite Taekjoo's tired voice, his attempts to calm Zhenya were unsuccessful. Excited by the previous action, Zhenya's cock, red and swollen, was trembling slightly with impatience. Zhenya didn't hesitate to bring his big glans closer to Taekjoo's hole.

“Wait... ah!”

Before Taekjoo could protest, Zhenya's cock had already penetrated powerfully between his digits, slowly pushing inside him. His mouth reflexively closed. Zhenya, having sunk his cock all the way to the bottom, didn't pull his fingers out, continuing to massage Taekjoo's groin, at the same time he rubbed his sweet spots from the inside. Soon his cock began to twitch rhythmically, creating several waves of pleasure. Taekjoo's insides were dilated to the limit, and each movement provoked new waves of pleasure that gave him goosebumps. Hushed, slurred moans kept pouring from his lips.

“Ahh... oh, oh, shit... not like that... don't do that.... Oh, oh!”

“Your body is... mmm.... Is squeezing me so hard, Taekjoo...”

Zhenya smiled, moving faster and faster. From the overwhelming stimulation, it seemed that Taekjoo's brain was about to melt. His body had become a solid erogenous zone, and even a slight touch or contact made his cock feel like it was about to explode. The crushing, throbbing sensation in his stomach kept increasing, reaching the very ends of his body. All that was left for Taekjoo was to moan, as if he was suffering endless agony.

Taekjoo woke up from a long, heavy sleep. He blinked a few times, trying to recall how long he’d been in that state. It was hard to pinpoint the last time he’d eaten properly. He’d spent some time near the stove, then soaked in the bathtub, and at some point, he woke up in bed. He had drifted in and out of consciousness repeatedly, and each time Zhenya was there, continuing his exploration of Taekjoo’s body. Sometimes, Taekjoo gave in; other times, he joined in. And when he was too exhausted, he simply let Zhenya do whatever he wanted until they both passed out.

By the time Taekjoo fully regained consciousness, he couldn’t move a single finger. He wanted to get up, freshen up, and drink something, but his body felt chained to the bed. It was as if he’d just completed a grueling task, with every muscle in his body aching. Even the slightest movement sent a dull pain through him, especially in the areas Zhenya had pressed the hardest.

He turned his head with effort, realizing why his arm felt heavy—it was pinned. Zhenya had wrapped his large frame around him, holding Taekjoo in a tight embrace while sleeping soundly. His head rested on Taekjoo’s arm, his grip firm around his waist. That explained why Taekjoo was practically immobilized.

“Hey, Zhenya.”

Taekjoo rasped out with difficulty. His voice sounded like rough metal scraping against metal. Clearing his throat didn’t help. Zhenya didn’t stir. He slept deeply, his breaths even, his flawless face serene. Taekjoo stared at him with a mix of irritation and resignation before shrugging slightly.

“Hey, wake up. Aren’t you hungry?”

He finally managed to say, straining to force his hoarse voice into coherence. After several attempts, Zhenya's eyes slowly opened, and he inhaled deeply. He blinked as though coming out of a restorative dream. His thick lashes fluttered like peacock feathers, and his blue eyes shone with a startling clarity. He was annoyingly handsome, even in the morning. Whatever annoyance Taekjoo had felt moments earlier melted away in an instant.

"You look awful." Zhenya remarked, his gaze fixed on Taekjoo.

"Whose damn fault is that?"

"You're blaming me again? You enjoyed it, even cried from the pleasure."

"Once is enough. If I say stop, then stop."

"That's so unfair."

Zhenya said with a shake of his head, smiling. Taekjoo felt a heavy weight settle on his chest. How was he supposed to live with this man, knowing endless challenges lay ahead? He was already exhausted just thinking about it.

"Enough already. Help me up."

Taekjoo muttered, trying to shove Zhenya off. Zhenya glanced at him with a hint of sadness but reluctantly got up. Without a word, he wrapped Taekjoo in the blanket and lifted him in his arms. Taekjoo froze in shock.

"Hey! I just asked for help standing up, not to be carried!"

"Are you really going to complain again?"

Zhenya grumbled, carrying him out of the room. After their intense night together, Taekjoo always felt weak in the knees, and now Zhenya had decided to take matters into his own hands, knowing any argument would be pointless.

Zhenya gently set Taekjoo, still wrapped in the blanket, onto a chair in the kitchen. As soon as his weight settled onto the seat, a dull ache shot up his spine, spreading an uncomfortable heaviness. Taekjoo let out a soft groan, and Zhenya gave him a look as if to say, *"See? Told you so."*

"What, huh? Whose fault is this, huh? Who do you think is to blame?"

"Is it really my fault? You left me alone and then kept insisting."

"Of course, it's your fault."

"When you have nothing else to say, you resort to sarcasm."

"Oh, really? Talking about yourself now? Whatever—just get me some water."

Taekjoo snapped, waving his hand impatiently. Without hesitation, Zhenya grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. Taekjoo reached out to take it, but Zhenya suddenly pulled it away.

“What the hell… Why?”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Forget? No, I don’t think so. Listen, seriously, stop rubbing my lips. They’re cracked, and even the slightest touch hurts. Yours don’t look much better.”

“I didn’t ask for a kiss,” Zhenya replied innocently, tilting his head. Then, squinting playfully, he added, *“You’re acting suspicious.”*

Taekjoo suspected Zhenya expected some soft, affectionate gesture from him, as couples often shared after a passionate night. But, as usual, he was wrong.

"What do you want, then?"

Zhenya calmly spun the water bottle in his hands as if it were some priceless treasure, smiling at Taekjoo, who looked like a cat eyeing a fish in a tank.

“Taekjoo, do you remember when you taught me to speak Korean?”

“Yes, yes, I remember! Now give me the water.”

“It wasn’t just, ‘Give it to me.’ You said more words.”

“Just give it to me!”

“No, you used a longer sentence [1].”

This clever guy, thought Taekjoo, irritated over such a trivial matter. He has an amazing memory for situations like these.

Taekjoo pressed his lips together, glaring at Zhenya, but the latter calmly met his gaze without moving from his seat. Suddenly, Taekjoo lunged to snatch the bottle, but Zhenya effortlessly raised his arm, keeping it out of reach. Frustrated, Taekjoo flailed his arms and stood from the chair, but Zhenya smoothly hid the bottle behind his back. Taekjoo tried leaping over the chair to grab it, only for Zhenya to pass it to his other hand with a smirk.

Breathing heavily and utterly vexed, Taekjoo threw up his hands in surrender.

"Fine! I give up."

Zhenya crossed his arms over his chest, his gaze dropping expectantly to Taekjoo’s lips.

"Hey, just give it to me!"

Taekjoo yelled suddenly, snatching the bottle in one quick move. Turning his body sideways to shield the bottle from Zhenya, he chugged the rest in one go. The water coursed through

his parched body, and at last, his foggy brain cleared.

Zhenya looked at Taekjoo with mock disdain.

"So, you were messing with me all along?"

"Messing with you? Of course not."

"Then why were you so stubborn about it?"

"Because it's something a younger person says to someone older."

"Older?"

"Yeah. You're the younger one. I'm the elder."

"And for the record, the age gap is big enough that when you were still an embryo, I was already ruling the playground. I've eaten a lot more than you—"

Taekjoo trailed off, realizing mid-sentence how ridiculous it was to discuss his rice porridge consumption with a blond, blue-eyed foreigner. He lowered his hand awkwardly. Zhenya, who had been studying him with a puzzled expression, suddenly concluded:

"So what you're saying is... you want me to call you hyung ?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying at all."

"But you do. Every time I called you that, you got all tense."

"Because it was weird!"

"No way. Taekjoo, be honest. You just want me to marry you, right?"

"...What?"

"You're worried I might get engaged to someone else, aren't you? All jealous and grumpy... fretting over how that would ruin my ties with my in-laws, huh?"

Zhenya grinned smugly, as if he'd cracked the code to an ancient riddle that had plagued him for ages. His face radiated so much satisfaction, like a scientist who had just made a groundbreaking discovery. What started as harmless teasing about Taekjoo's insistence on *hyung* had spiraled far beyond the realm of reason. If left unchecked, Zhenya's fantasies might shoot straight to the stars. Yet Taekjoo was too stunned and drained to correct or argue against Zhenya's wild fiction.

"You little bastard. I called you handsome one time, and it totally inflated your ego."

Still floating on cloud nine, Zhenya retorted, *"You think I'm that handsome?"*

He tilted his head and smiled sweetly. Taekjoo waved his hand dismissively. This guy always twisted things to suit himself, so why bother arguing? And really, what was the point? With

that charming smile plastered on Zhenya's face, it was hard to muster the energy to fight him.

"Think whatever you want. Just feed me already—I'm starving."

Taekjoo said, rubbing his stomach. He was so drained he couldn't even hear its growling anymore. His skin felt like it was glued to his spine. Between the stress of being back in Korea and hastily scarfing down whatever meals he could, it was no wonder he felt this weak.

Looking perfectly pleased with himself, Zhenya headed to the kitchen and began rummaging for food. Soon, he pulled out two pre-cooked meals that only needed reheating and popped them into the microwave. Standing in front of the appliance, Zhenya stared intently as the food rotated inside.

Taekjoo's mind wandered to the photos on his phone that captured moments just like this. For the longest time, he hadn't understood why he had so many similar pictures. But now, it was clear. Those must have been snapshots of happiness. These small, clumsy gestures Zhenya made for Taekjoo's sake had become an integral part of his life, bringing him comfort and joy even in the simplest of moments.

He watched Zhenya, captivated by how intoxicating his presence was. He wished he could capture this moment in a photograph, but all of that had been lost in the helicopter crash—the phone, along with other possessions, had disappeared.

The familiar *ding* of the microwave snapped him back to reality, signaling the end of its task. Zhenya pulled out a reheated bowl of porridge and set it on the table. It was porridge with eggs and vegetables, resembling baby food.

"You got it wrong again. Do you think I even like this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why would you cook this?"

"It's the best I could find here in terms of Korean food."

"Are you serious?"

Zhenya didn't reply. Instead, he gracefully picked up a spoon, took a bite of the porridge, and let a satisfied smile spread across his face. Carefully wiping his mouth with a napkin, he finished the entire portion in silence. In that moment, the humble porridge in his hands seemed more like an expensive soup than a pre-made, second-rate dish.

When Zhenya finally set the spoon down, his eyes met Taekjoo's. Caught, Taekjoo quickly looked away and began eating the now-cooling porridge in a hurry. Just a few spoonfuls later, his bowl was empty, yet his hunger persisted.

"Don't you have any meat?"

"You've got quite the appetite in the morning."

“Morning? I haven’t eaten properly in days! This isn’t about me having a big appetite; it’s about you serving tiny portions. You eat like we’re in the middle of a war. How can you ever feel full?”

Zhenya didn’t eat much, despite his impressive size. Even though he ate noticeably less than Taekjoo, his physique was impeccable, and his energy seemed boundless—a fact that always irked Taekjoo a little.

“Hold on.”

Zhenya said, heading to the kitchen with the empty dishes in hand. Taekjoo watched him with interest, resting his chin on his hand. The play of Zhenya’s muscles under his skin, even in the smallest movements, was impossible to ignore, as if his body had been purposefully sculpted. With his tall frame, long limbs, and lean build, Zhenya’s well-defined muscles never made him appear bulky.

Taekjoo’s gaze drifted to his pale skin, now marked with faint red traces—bite marks and scratches from nails. Though Taekjoo always kept his nails trimmed, their nights together inevitably left Zhenya with such marks.

“Doesn’t it hurt?”

“What exactly?”

“Your back.”

Zhenya turned his head slightly, seeming to catch his meaning. Looking over his shoulder, he shrugged nonchalantly while putting a frozen steak into the oven.

“If the man I love wants to leave his marks on me, how could I deny him?”

Zhenya replied, smiling in satisfaction. Though the marks resembled scars more than romantic kisses, Zhenya saw them differently. To him, they were a kind of love note. And, given that Zhenya often provoked such reactions himself, it wasn’t surprising.

“Yevgeny.”

Hearing his full name, Zhenya looked over in surprise. He was so accustomed to being called simply “Zhenya” that the formal version sounded odd. Silently, he regarded Taekjoo as if trying to gauge his mood. At times, this strong and seemingly unshakable man had moments of surprising sentimentality. With a quiet sigh, Taekjoo asked.

“Do you really like me that much?”

“That’s a strange question, Taekjoo.”

“The people I knew before you—friends, even lovers—they all left because they felt they weren’t my priority. And yet, you’ve stayed, despite my same attitude.”

“That’s because I have no reason to leave.”

Zhenya said calmly, without hesitation. His certainty left Taekjoo momentarily speechless.

“I told you before—I admire people with strong spirits, those who don’t crumble even under hardship.”

“So what? There are plenty of people like that. Even the one you could’ve married seemed just as capable.”

Zhenya’s lips curved into a soft smile as his eyes narrowed slightly.

“Yes, and your jealousy is part of your charm.”

“Jealousy?!”

“If you weren’t jealous, you wouldn’t keep bringing it up every chance you get.”

Taekjoo faltered for a moment. Zhenya had hit the mark. Even if Taekjoo told himself not to dwell on it, the topic of Zhenya’s ex-fiancée always managed to surface. Was he really that jealous?

“It’s rare to meet someone like you—someone who persists. It was fascinating to see how long you’d last before breaking. At first, I was drawn to that.”

“Is that so? Fascinating that you found it interesting while the person next to you was nearly dying. You’re definitely insane.”

Taekjoo shot back sharply, eyeing Zhenya’s serene smile.

“And yet, if by ‘that attitude’ you mean the ‘special treatment’ I give you, then it doesn’t bother me in the slightest.”

“Special treatment?”

“I was your first partner, wasn’t I? It all started the moment you accepted that.”

“That was because of the corrupt schemes of our superiors…”

“And yet, despite that, you seemed to trust and depend on me. So it’s no surprise you felt betrayed.”

Taekjoo realized Zhenya might be right. Throughout their time together, he had distrusted and resented Zhenya, but at the same time, he had relied on him for guidance and solace. Maybe that was just how it was meant to be with a partner.

Even though their partnership wasn’t his choice, Taekjoo had gone through every trial alongside Zhenya. When he discovered the lies and betrayal, he had been overwhelmed by disappointment. He was hurt. Angry. Most of all, he was consumed by guilt and a deep sense of betrayal—not just by Zhenya, whom he had briefly seen as an ally, but by himself.

“Isn’t there something more? You even begged me several times to save you, though I nearly killed you.”

“That’s just basic survival instinct—something every human has. I doubt you’ve ever begged anyone for mercy.”

“That’s something only the weak and defenseless do.”

“Of course,” Taekjoo said, his tone laced with sarcasm.

“But that was the first time you ever showed me weakness, Taekjoo.”

“…What?” Kwon Taekjoo asked, caught off guard.

“You even said you’d rather die than stay with me. You accepted it so easily back then, yet at the same time, you clung to me as if your defenses had crumbled entirely.”

Kwon Taekjoo had never asked anyone to save him. To him, death was part of the job, and he had never sought survival at any cost. He believed his fate was to die in the line of duty and trusted only himself. Every accomplishment had to come through his own effort.

But at some point, while being with Zhenya, he began to hope. Even in a foggy state of mind, he realized that by asking Zhenya for help, he was holding on to life. When had he become so reliant?

“You even begged me not to leave you—only me, Taekjoo. And you still do.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You were just scared, weren’t you? Afraid that I’d leave you. That one day I’d break like everyone else.”

Kwon Taekjoo stayed silent.

“I think I’ve told you before—I’ve never felt more adrenaline and happiness in my entire life.”

Zhenya said, placing one hand on the table and leaning in slowly. His light lashes lowered slightly, creating an air of intimacy. His gaze softened, glimmering faintly. Taekjoo couldn’t help but wonder where this man—who claimed never to have had a romantic relationship—had learned such tricks.

Assuming Zhenya was about to kiss him, Taekjoo parted his lips slightly. But just then, the oven timer buzzed, snapping the moment in two. Zhenya, catching the flicker of disappointment on Taekjoo’s face, smirked and turned toward the oven as if nothing had happened.

He pulled out a perfectly cooked steak, its rich aroma filling the kitchen.

Zhenya plated the steak with care and set it in front of Taekjoo. Then, he poured a glass of wine and offered it to him.

“What’s next for you?”

“What’s next for me?”

Taekjoo replied, focusing solely on his meal as he picked up the knife and fork.

“Are you really going to leave the National Intelligence Service?”

“I already left. I’m dead now.”

Taekjoo said indifferently, cutting off a large piece of steak and popping it into his mouth. Despite having been frozen earlier, the steak was fresh and perfectly seasoned, satisfying his hunger. Zhenya folded his arms across his chest, watching Taekjoo eat with his cheeks puffed out.

“You once said the job was what gave you joy and excitement.”

“I said it’s when I feel alive, not just excited.”

Zhenya shrugged as if to say, *What’s the difference?* Though the words were distinct, Taekjoo struggled to articulate their nuance.

“Well, that was before you came along. Without you, it became dull.”

“I told you—I’ll follow you wherever you go.”

“You don’t have to sacrifice yourself for that.”

“Sacrifice?”

Zhenya repeated, as if the concept itself were foreign to him. Taekjoo rephrased.

“Well, maybe not sacrifice, but lose. Because of me, you betrayed your country, distanced yourself from your family. You’ve made enough enemies already—you don’t need more.”

“Really? My country and I have been at odds for a long time. My family and I were never close. I’ve always had enemies, and you leaving the Intelligence Service doesn’t change any of that.”

“You’re right, but… even if you’re used to it, I don’t like it. I don’t want you in danger.”

Zhenya tilted his head slightly, as if he didn’t understand what kind of danger Taekjoo was referring to. He rarely seemed to consider himself in danger, perhaps believing himself invincible. Though undeniably strong, in Taekjoo’s eyes, Zhenya sometimes resembled a reckless child let loose at the edge of the sea.

Taekjoo smirked and suddenly pinched Zhenya’s cheek. Zhenya’s eyes widened in surprise.

“The more I think about it, the more I realize you’re like a walking bomb. No one knows when you’ll explode or how bad the damage will be. Even the most ordinary situation becomes a disaster with you involved. But one thing’s for sure—you’re never boring.”

“Hmm... Well, in that case...”

Zhenya smiled and lifted his chin slightly, as if proud. As expected, he squared his shoulders. Even when his lover called him a “bomb” and a “disaster,” Zhenya took it as a compliment. Playfully, he pinched Zhenya’s nose before letting go.

“...Taekjoo?”

“It’s really hard to make you human. Anyway, if your country keeps you as an ambassador, I can work as your personal bodyguard. If they fire you, we’ll figure something else out. I think we should lay low until things settle down.”

“You said you weren’t going to work anymore.”

“I won’t. But that doesn’t mean I’ll sit around doing nothing. Even if you’re not working, you should at least stay active—exercise, do some volunteer work. Otherwise, the body weakens and rusts.”

Zhenya frowned, as though he had just heard something absurd. Rest and relaxation in the same breath? The thought seemed ludicrous to him. If Yoon Jongwoo were here, for once, he’d have agreed completely.

“Let’s do everything together. Whatever it is.”

“Alright.”

Taekjoo replied softly, offering Zhenya a piece of steak on his fork. Zhenya eyed it incredulously but leaned in and ate it anyway. Suddenly, Zhenya’s demeanor shifted. He grabbed Taekjoo’s arm brusquely and scanned the room.

“Stop.”

Taekjoo immediately tensed, focusing on the faint sounds surrounding them. Zhenya approached the window but didn’t peer out directly. Instead, he lifted the curtain slightly to survey the area outside.

Sensing something was wrong, Taekjoo rose silently.

After a few moments of careful observation, Zhenya delivered the grim news.

“It seems the pests have arrived.”

When Zhenya disabled the security system earlier, someone had evidently seized the opportunity to breach the perimeter. Taekjoo tossed the gun from the table to him, then dashed to the basement. He grabbed an arsenal of weapons, grenades, and ammunition,

stuffing them into a backpack and carrying some of it in his arms as he rushed back to the kitchen.

By the time he returned, Zhenya was fully dressed and had already armed himself with the rifle Taekjoo had thrown to him. Both men moved with swift precision, preparing for battle.

Zhenya, quicker to gear up, fastened the lone tactical vest onto Taekjoo. The latter tried to take it off, but Zhenya firmly secured the straps, ensuring it fit snugly. Then he flipped a switch, plunging the house into complete darkness.

Pressed against the wall near the window, they silently observed the street. As soon as the lights went out, the intruders seemed to pause. The figures that had been moving in the shadows disappeared, likely taking cover and waiting for a response.

“I’ll go out and distract them.”

“Then at least take the vest.”

Taekjoo countered, trying again to remove his protective gear. But Zhenya gripped his arm tightly.

“I’m not going to die, Taekjoo.”

Zhenya said with calm conviction. Somehow, those words were reassuring. Taekjoo felt an inexplicable trust that Zhenya would return to him alive and unharmed.

He adjusted a helmet with bulletproof goggles onto Zhenya’s head, tapping it lightly to ensure it fit snugly.

“Your blonde hair draws too much attention anyway. I’ll cover you.”

Zhenya nodded and was about to turn away when Taekjoo grabbed him by the collar and pulled him close, planting a quick kiss on his lips. Zhenya’s eyes widened in surprise.

“…Taekjoo?

Adjusting the strap on Zhenya’s helmet, Taekjoo spoke firmly.

“Don’t you dare get hurt.”

“Hurt? Me?”

“Your face and body are your saving grace, so don’t even think about coming back with scratches.”

Taekjoo said with a faint chuckle. Zhenya laughed in response.

“Who’s talking? Watch yourself too. If you get a stomach wound, you’ll forget about our fun for a month.”

He repeated a line they had once exchanged as a joke, then leaned in for a quick farewell kiss. With a hint of reluctance, Zhenya stepped back and moved swiftly toward the back door. Taekjoo watched him for a moment before attaching a night scope to his sniper rifle and loading the ammunition. His eyes sharpened with focus.

Descending quietly into the basement, he hugged the wall, stopping at a narrow exterior slit —ideal for a sniper. He stacked a few crates to brace himself and carefully poked the muzzle of his rifle through the opening. Squinting through the scope, he spotted several figures cautiously approaching. All of them were armed, numbering around twenty.

Clearly, they were well-versed in Zhenya's defense systems; no helicopters had been heard so far. It was likely they had arrived by inflatable boats. Only a force like the Russian military could afford such a precise operation. The Kremlin had likely sent a special unit to coerce Zhenya into submission—either to capture him or eliminate him, and gain access to the *Anastasia* hidden somewhere on this island.

Taekjoo wasn't about to surrender. No one who laid a hand on Zhenya would leave this place alive.

Just then, the roar of an engine echoed from behind the house. Zhenya seemed to be using a quad bike to lure the attackers into an open field. Those hiding in the shadows opened fire immediately. Taekjoo, watching the muzzle flashes through his night scope, pulled the trigger without hesitation.

"Shit!"

"Damn it!"

Several enemies went down, clutching wounded arms and legs. Zhenya's quad tore through them, leaving a trail of carnage. Some were so mangled they looked like broken toys. Taekjoo flinched in disgust but continued firing with precision at any enemy who came into view.

Under a hail of bullets, Zhenya maneuvered the quad expertly, lobbing grenades as he sped by. Those attempting to evade either got crushed by the vehicle or shot down by Taekjoo. A few exploded on the spot.

The problem, however, was the sheer number of enemies. No sooner had Taekjoo decimated one group than another of equal size emerged, directing concentrated fire at Zhenya.

Zhenya dodged their attacks and headed for the mountains. As he passed the mansion, he glanced toward the basement, as if to check on Taekjoo. In response, Taekjoo coldly took down several enemies pursuing him, shooting them through the head with chilling accuracy.

Meanwhile, the enemies began noticing someone else was present besides Zhenya. Some of those chasing him broke away from the main group, scattering in different directions. Taekjoo fired at them relentlessly but couldn't hit them all.

"Damn it."

Without hesitation, he got up and bolted upstairs. Just then, the sound of shattering glass echoed through the house, followed by something flying inside—it was a grenade. Dodging the series of explosions, Taekjoo kept moving. When another grenade landed directly in front of him, he slid forward, grabbed it mid-motion, and hurled it back toward the door. The explosion tore through the doorway and shattered nearby windows. Cries rang out from where the enemies had taken cover.

But it wasn't enough to stop them. They kept closing the distance, leveraging their superior numbers. Through the wrecked doorway and broken windows, more combatants began pouring in, one after another. Taekjoo rushed up the stairs, aiming to secure a better vantage point. Gunfire followed him, bullets whizzing past as he sprinted to the rooftop where the helipad was located. Slamming the heavy iron door shut behind him, he slid under the helicopter, training his weapon on the entrance.

The sound of pursuit suddenly fell silent. Then, a moment later, the door was blown off its hinges with a thunderous bang. The intruders had used a small explosive to breach the passage. A minigun roared to life through the now-charred opening, mowing down the first wave of attackers attempting to enter. Those behind tried to retaliate, but Taekjoo rolled to the side and lobbed a grenade. The resulting explosion silenced the stairwell completely.

"Ha... ha..."

He panted, sprawled out on the ground. But the sound of distant gunfire in the forest snapped him back into focus. Even in the pitch-black night, he could see the muzzle flashes and bursts of light from the weapons. Zhenya was still moving, relentless, staying ahead of his pursuers.

"Zhenya…"

Taekjoo whispered anxiously, his gaze fixed on the chaos unfolding in the distance. Suddenly, a sharp sound came from behind. Turning quickly, he spotted a grappling hook latching onto the rooftop railing. The mechanical whir of a winch followed, accompanied by the sound of enemy forces scaling up. Gritting his teeth, Taekjoo dashed to the opposite side of the roof. Reaching the edge, he didn't hesitate—he jumped.

As he fell to the lower level, the rooftop enemies opened fire wildly, hitting nothing but their already fallen comrades.

Landing with precision, Taekjoo quickly secured a rope to the lower railing and launched himself off the wall, swinging for momentum. On the third swing, he built up enough force to crash through a first-floor window. The sound of breaking glass caught the attention of the rooftop pursuers, who immediately scrambled down the stairs.

"First floor!"

Four men began descending rapidly, but in the next instant, the floor beneath them gave way. They plummeted into the ground floor with the debris. Dazed by the fall, they looked up to see a dark figure looming over them—it was Taekjoo.

"Hello there."

He said with a smirk, aiming his weapon at the disoriented enemies. He pulled the trigger without hesitation, and one by one, the attackers fell, their screams drowned by the relentless gunfire.

Taekjoo didn't release the trigger until his magazine ran dry, leaving the room in complete silence.

"Phew..."

With his opponents eliminated, Taekjoo glanced out the window, his expression weary. The mansion was still now, no further movement in sight. In the distance, however, gunfire and explosions continued. That could only mean one thing—Zhenya was still alive, still fighting.

Taekjoo ejected the empty magazine from his rifle and loaded a fresh one. Tightening the loose laces of his boots, he muttered to himself,

"It's time to go rescue the princess."

Zhenya continued luring the enemies up the mountainside. His pursuers, sparing no ammunition, caught up to him during the climb but soon eased off. They likely decided it was wiser to stalk him and strike from behind rather than waste their energy in a full-on chase. It was the right calculation. After all, Zhenya couldn't just keep running—he needed to know why the gunfire at the mansion had stopped. Time was against him.

He stopped at the nearest cabin. Inside, there were several neatly stacked sets of skiing equipment. He chose a pair of skis capable of gliding over grass, strapped them on, and slung his sniper rifle over his shoulder.

With his preparations complete, Zhenya left the SUV behind and began his descent. He knew the terrain so well he could navigate it blindfolded. He had memorized exactly where to go to avoid unnecessary clashes and where enemies might be lying in wait.

It was risky. The darkness was impenetrable, and Zhenya kept his headlights off to avoid detection. The enemy could be watching, scanning for any hint of his presence. If they spotted him first with their night vision, he'd become an easy target. If bullets started flying from all directions, even he might not make it out alive.

Yet, without hesitation, he pushed forward, gliding swiftly downhill. The skis moved smoothly over the grassy slope, picking up speed. He activated the thermal goggles Taekjoo had given him, and soon, enemies lit up in his field of vision. Zhenya began firing. His silenced rifle made no sound, but the startled cries of wild animals fleeing the area gave away the chaos. Nervous, the enemies started firing wildly.

Using the erratic gunfire as a guide, Zhenya calculated their positions with precision and picked his targets. One enemy, clad in an infrared-resistant suit, cried out before collapsing to the ground. Another, hiding on the opposite flank, met the same fate moments later.

It didn’t take long for the enemies to realize Zhenya’s strategy, and they stopped firing. Silence returned. Then, faint red laser sights lit up, converging on Zhenya. Despite his rapid descent, he targeted the sources of the beams, aiming for their originators’ heads and torsos. One by one, the enemies fell under his precise fire.

The number of lasers locked on him dwindled quickly. But the situation remained dangerous—the beams, which had previously only grazed him, now honed in on his chest and head with increasing accuracy. No matter how he changed his direction or speed, the lasers tracked him, brushing perilously close. One bullet even grazed the tip of his ski.

Just as the precision targeting reached its peak, the distant thrum of helicopter blades broke through the night. The strong wind caused the trees to sway violently, grabbing the attention of everyone on the battlefield. Even Zhenya turned to the source of the sound. A familiar helicopter appeared in view.

"Is that Taekjoo at the controls or the enemy?"

Zhenya wondered, narrowing his eyes. As he watched, a powerful spotlight suddenly blazed to life, bathing the area in blinding light. What had been shrouded in darkness now looked as clear as daylight. The enemies, who had been hiding in the shadows, were now fully exposed. Though the pilot remained silhouetted, Zhenya immediately recognized the figure—it was Taekjoo, arriving just in time.

A small smile tugged at Zhenya’s lips. Without hesitation, he unstrapped his skis and sprinted uphill, his boots crunching against the uneven terrain. His speed was unnatural, almost as if he were flying through the trees. Even the steep incline did nothing to slow him down.

Exposed by the floodlight, the enemies began firing at the helicopter's spotlight, their bullets sparking off its armored casing. The light, however, held steady, stubbornly illuminating their positions without retaliating—though it could have easily turned the tide with its own firepower.

Zhenya heard the bark of gunfire ahead. One soldier was reloading his weapon when a shadow appeared behind him. He spun around sharply, startled as if sensing some monstrous presence. But before he could react, the sharp crack of a gunshot echoed, leaving a neat hole in his head.

“One.”

Vaulting over a rock, he lunged at the next enemy, who was too preoccupied shielding himself from the helicopter’s light. Grabbing the man from behind, Zhenya twisted his neck with a sharp motion. The body crumpled lifelessly to the ground.

“Two.”

Gunfire erupted from behind a nearby tree. Using the fallen body as a shield, Zhenya moved swiftly, shooting through the corpse’s arm to hit his attacker. The return fire stopped abruptly.

“Three.”

Suddenly, a grenade landed nearby. Sensing its approach, Zhenya darted into the shadows created by the helicopter's beam.

The soldier who had thrown the grenade reached for another. As he scanned the area and pulled the pin, a precise bullet shattered his elbow.

"Ahh!"

Before he could process what was happening, he saw Zhenya perched above him in a tree, his face faintly illuminated from behind. The eerie glow lent an almost supernatural air to his quiet smirk.

"Four."

The grenade the enemy hadn't had time to throw exploded, killing him instantly. Zhenya, who had swiftly dispatched four adversaries, stood up and surveyed the area. Only one enemy remained alive. Taekjoo's helicopter continued circling above, searching for the remaining targets.

Soon, the helicopter's spotlight illuminated the ravine where the last enemy was hiding. Realizing his ammunition was running low and that he stood no chance of surviving alone, the man bolted, panic in his eyes. Zhenya leapt down from the tree, grabbed the rifle lying on the ground, and threw it toward the fleeing man. The rifle flew through the air, landing right at the enemy's feet. The man tripped over it and tumbled down the slope.

Zhenya quickly caught up. The only surviving enemy, with a broken leg, tried to crawl away, hoping for an escape. But before he could get far, Zhenya's dark figure loomed over him. His presence was so ominous that the man might have mistaken him for Deathstroke himself. The injured enemy began begging for mercy.

"Please, mercy, mercy…"

Without hesitation, Zhenya stepped on the man's neck, slamming his face into the ground. The enemy's body shuddered before going limp.

"Five."

With that, death once again claimed control over Ajinoki.

Zhenya paused for a moment to catch his breath and looked up at the hovering helicopter. The strong wind made his platinum hair and clothing whip wildly in every direction. He waved his hand at the helicopter, signaling for it to come closer. Taekjoo, who had been watching from the cockpit, began waving his arms energetically, signaling that the ladder wasn't ready yet.

Zhenya paid no mind and started rushing down the slope. The helicopter followed, descending to match his speed. Using the momentum from his sprint, Zhenya jumped and grabbed the helicopter's footrest with both hands. Pulling himself up, it didn't take long for him to climb aboard. As soon as he stepped inside, Taekjoo's reprimands began to pour out.

“You’re insane! Why do you always risk your life like that? Do you actually think you’re immortal?”

Even though neither of them was seriously injured, Taekjoo was fuming. Suddenly, Zhenya grabbed Taekjoo’s face and kissed him roughly, without waiting for a reaction.

“Mmph! What the hell are you doing, you lunatic? I’m flying!”

Taekjoo tried to pull away, but Zhenya didn’t relent. Their breaths mixed—his hot breath against Taekjoo’s cool lips—and the sound of his throat growling betrayed his excitement. Zhenya continued kissing Taekjoo until the other man finally pulled back.

“Ugh, tastes like blood.”

Taekjoo muttered, wiping blood from his cheek with his shoulder, clearly disgusted. Zhenya wrapped his arms around Taekjoo’s back, resting his head on his shoulder as he took control of the controls. Following Taekjoo’s movements, the helicopter quickly made its way to the landing strip outside the mansion. After a smooth landing, Taekjoo switched off the engine and slowly examined Zhenya from head to toe.

“Did you get hurt anywhere?”

“You always ask such strange questions.”

“Stop pretending, you idiot. They tried to kill you, are you sure you’re okay?”

Zhenya squinted, laughing cheerfully. He shook his head and smiled.

“Do you really care that much?”

His expression softened, as if the man who had just killed his enemies in cold blood wasn’t the same person.

“Yes, my dear, until death.”

Taekjoo said with a hint of frustration, sighing slightly as he tugged on Zhenya’s cheeks. Noticing Zhenya’s amused expression, he leaned in and kissed him briefly. Zhenya, who had initially let the kiss happen in silence, suddenly lunged at Taekjoo with hunger, their lips crashing together. Taekjoo squeezed Zhenya’s cheeks with his thumbs, forcing his mouth open, and pushed his tongue deep inside. Zhenya’s tongue pressed forward, deeper and deeper, until Taekjoo began to struggle to breathe.

Taekjoo tried to cough, but Zhenya, as though enjoying it, persisted. His tongue tangled with Taekjoo’s, not allowing any resistance, and Zhenya sucked on the tip of his tongue fiercely. The passionate kiss lasted until Taekjoo began desperately hitting Zhenya’s hand, begging him to stop.

“Ha… ha… You’re really going to kill me with your kisses, psychopath.”

“You always start it and then blame me.”

Taekjoo waved his hand dismissively, too tired to continue arguing. Zhenya ignored him and began kissing his hands, his cheeks, the corners of his lips, before gently moving to his seat in the cockpit, draping his arm over Taekjoo's shoulder and stroking his ear. He whispered something until the stars in the night sky overhead shone brightly, as if they might fall at any moment.

A curtain of light swirled between them, reflecting the color of Zhenya's eyes: it was the Northern Lights.

"Damn, that's beautiful."

"What?"

Zhenya asked, raising his head. Though it had been a compliment to the aurora, Taekjoo looked at Zhenya and repeated,

"Beautiful."

Realizing Taekjoo was referring to him, Zhenya smiled and moved closer, ready to kiss him again, but Taekjoo stopped him with a hand.

"And now what? It seems like this isn't over. They'll keep attacking."

"Hmmm… fulfilling the old ambitions of the Kremlin doesn't sound like such a bad idea."

"Fulfilling them? How?"

Taekjoo looked at him, confused. Zhenya leaned back slowly, a satisfied smile spreading across his face.

"They've always feared whether 'Anastasia' is still alive or has long since rested in peace. The last imperial princess could show up and take everything they've earned. They're trembling in fear and rushing to meet her in person. They have no choice but to meet 'Anastasia.'"

His bright blue eyes sparkled, full of determination.

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Chapter End Notes

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The Answer Is

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Just ten minutes ago, the Kremlin had been struck. A missile attack, undetected by air defense radars or any security system, had thrown all of Russia into chaos. Emergency alarms blared across Moscow, and the military and police forces scrambled into high alert, establishing a defensive perimeter within a 10-kilometer radius of the Kremlin. Major roads leading into Moscow were immediately blocked off, and citizens were evacuated to designated shelters. Firefighters and emergency responders were dispatched to extinguish the blaze and conduct rescue operations, turning the area around the Kremlin into a chaotic gridlock of vehicles.

At the time of the attack, the President and key officials had been attending a cabinet meeting. Following emergency protocols, they scattered in all directions. The President had evacuated through a secure passage from the meeting room to a shelter—a fortress designed to withstand even nuclear strikes. The shelter was fully equipped for survival, with enough emergency rations, water, air purification systems, and heating to sustain its occupants for at least a year. It was one of the President's earliest projects, conceived as part of his blueprint for reclaiming lost territories.

Inside the shelter, the President gulped down his favorite vodka like it was water, his unease evident. The sudden, unexpected strike had left him visibly shaken. Had he been in his office instead of the meeting room, he might not have survived. The missile that hit the Kremlin was frighteningly precise, designed to target and destroy specific objectives.

The President paced nervously through the shelter's lounge, his expression a mix of fear and anger. A soft knock on the door made him freeze momentarily. A voice from outside called, *"Sir, it's Bazim."* Letting out a sigh of relief, the President watched as Bazim entered and immediately shouted:

“Why are you only showing up now?”

“Apologies, sir. I was delayed investigating the nature of this attack.”

“Well, who’s behind it? Who would commit such a heinous act?”

“We don’t have conclusive information yet, but based on the missile debris and trajectory, it doesn’t appear to have been launched from abroad.”

“What?” The President’s voice wavered. *“Then…a coup?”*

His grip on the glass tightened as his voice betrayed his mounting fear. A rebellion was the one thing he dreaded most. Especially now, on the brink of war, internal discord could derail all his plans. A coup at such a critical moment was unthinkable—and unacceptable.

The President darted his unfocused eyes around the room, muttering to himself in rapid succession.

“Who could it be? Who the hell would dare...? Could it be Lebedev? That bastard? He’s never been enthusiastic about a preemptive strike. Always trying to hold back, looking for an excuse to avoid action. We’ve let him grow too comfortable. Or maybe Ivanov? He was at the meeting earlier, wasn’t he? Come to think of it, he couldn’t put down his phone. His expression seemed...off. Yes, him...or is it Il’in? He’s always been critical, saying this isn’t the right time for war. Could it be the Supreme Commander? I’ve reprimanded him countless times for wasting the defense budget—maybe he’s finally turned against me.”

The President continued his breathless monologue, his words tumbling out like machine-gun fire. It was clear the shock had muddled his mind, though his bouts of neurosis were hardly new to those around him. The chief of staff and head of security exchanged uneasy glances, familiar with this erratic behavior. In contrast, Bazim kept his gaze fixed solely on their aging, fragile leader, now reduced to a shadow of his former self.

The President’s grand vision of territorial reclamation was, in truth, nothing more than a reflection of his own fears—a despot masking his anxiety and dread with tyrannical bravado.

Suddenly, the President froze and then, as if struck by divine inspiration, declared with conviction:

“...Of course. Psych! How could I have forgotten him? It has to be him. Or...does it?”

Bazim said nothing. He, too, had a gnawing suspicion that Zhenya was behind the attack. This strike was likely a final ultimatum, a retaliation for the President’s prior incursions into Zhenya’s territory. If they wanted to avoid a civil war, it was imperative to tread carefully. Zhenya was believed to possess *Anastasia*, and provoking him would be disastrous. That man cared nothing for his family, his nation, or even his own life. If pushed, he would press the launch button without hesitation.

And yet, blinded by his fraying judgment, the President was poised to make the worst possible decision.

“This time, I’ll make an example of him. Psych won’t dare to step out of line again. Scramble the fighter jets immediately!”

“Sir, you must reconsider. This could escalate into a civil war.”

“Civil war? Nonsense. Psych is just one man. The mightiest military force in the world can crush a single traitor! After this attack, all eyes are on me. Now is the time to show unwavering strength!”

The President’s spit flew as he stubbornly doubled down, demanding immediate action. However, none of his aides moved, instead exchanging uneasy glances.

“What are you waiting for? I said wipe them out!”

“Sending jets will be pointless. We’ve already deployed several, haven’t we? Further attacks will only waste our forces, painstakingly assembled as they are. Besides, while the first strike was a missile, if we retaliate, he’ll counterattack even harder. Sir, you yourself believe he’s hiding Anastasia, do you not?”

Bazim’s reasoned approach seemed to fall on deaf ears. The President persisted in his fury.

“We’ll bombard him until he’s out of ammunition! Don’t give him the chance to use Anastasia or anything else—press him relentlessly! How could one man withstand such a full-scale assault?”

“If we misstep, we could all die. Moscow, perhaps even all of Russia, could be obliterated,” Bazim said, raising his voice slightly in an attempt to drive home the gravity of the situation.

A sharp crack echoed through the room as the President, overcome by rage, struck Bazim across the face. The force of the slap snapped Bazim’s head to the side, leaving him stunned. The chief of staff and head of security quickly averted their eyes, pretending not to have witnessed the outburst.

The President glared at Bazim, his chest heaving with anger.

“Is this about blood? Are you protecting him because you’re related? Can’t bring yourself to kill your own kin, is that it?”

“I am only prioritizing the safety of this nation.”

Bazim replied, keeping his voice steady despite the stinging blow.

“Then you’d better listen to me more carefully. I am the Kremlin. I am Russia. Don’t ever question my orders again. Don’t even let me remember that Psych is your kin.”

Grabbing Bazim’s chin, the President forced him to meet his gaze. His glossy, unblinking eyes bore into Bazim’s, every word dripping with menace.

“If you fail to handle this properly, you and the Bogdanov family will be branded traitors. Everything you’ve accomplished up until now will crumble into nothing. Do you

understand?"

He released Bazim's jaw with a harsh flick, leaving red marks in his wake. Snatching a wet wipe, he scrubbed his hands vigorously, muttering under his breath.

"Filthy dog spawn. You show them a little favor, and they dare to challenge their betters—overstep their place, time and again."

The air inside the shelter froze over in an instant. The tense silence was broken by the sudden ringing of the chief of staff's phone, making him flinch. Hastily, he answered, his nervousness evident in his voice. After a few moments of listening, his expression brightened.

"Sir, we've managed to reach your family!"

"Hand it over."

The President said, waving impatiently for the phone. The chief of staff stepped forward to pass the phone to him, but before he could, a sharp metallic *click* echoed through the room, halting everyone in their tracks.

The President turned, his face a mixture of disbelief and outrage, as he realized the source of the sound. Bazim stood behind him, a gun firmly trained on the back of his head.

"You? What do you think you're doing?"

"Reconsider this, sir. This isn't a matter to resolve based on impulse. The fate of the nation is at stake."

"You bastard, how dare you—"

Before the President could finish, Bazim pulled the trigger without hesitation. The gunshot was deafening, and the entire room stood in stunned silence. It had happened so quickly that not even the guards had time to react—or perhaps they hadn't intended to.

The once-mighty ruler of the nation, who just moments ago commanded absolute power, now lay lifeless on the floor, blood pooling beneath him.

Bazim wiped a long streak of blood from his cheek with the back of his hand, smearing it across his skin. His cold, unfeeling eyes stared down at the body with an eerie calm.

"Clean it up."

No one dared question him. The chief of staff draped a blanket over the President's body while the head of security summoned other guards to discreetly remove the remains. None of them fully understood what had just transpired; they simply followed Bazim's commands in stunned compliance.

As the others busied themselves, Bazim remained motionless, his gaze fixed on the bloodstained floor. Finally, the chief of staff spoke, his voice hesitant and barely above a

whisper:

“Sir... what about the order to send the jets?”

“I never gave such an order.”

“Yes, sir. Understood.”

The chief of staff gave a small bow before retreating quietly. Left alone, Bazim tilted his head back, staring at the ceiling as he let out a deep breath. His gaze eventually dropped to the bloodstained marble floor, where dark red streaks and smudges painted a macabre path leading out of the room.

He followed it, walking steadily toward the President’s office. With each step, the soles of his shoes left fresh crimson prints behind him—like the echo of those who had walked this path of power before, now etched into history.

The office was in shambles from the earlier missile strike. Debris littered the floor, and the faint smell of smoke lingered in the air. Bazim paused to take it all in, the chaos a stark reminder of how fragile everything was.

Eventually, he moved to the window. Outside, summoned troops and police were erecting layers of barricades, their movements brisk and precise. He perched on the edge of the desk, silently observing the scene below.

Only the occasional barked orders of commanders, the rhythmic stomp of boots, and the metallic click of weapons being prepped broke the silence. It was an eerie calm, the kind that settled before the storm hit.

Dragging his hands over his weathered face, Bazim exhaled a long, weary sigh. The weight of everything bore down on him all at once, exhaustion gripping him more tightly than ever.

He needed rest. Tomorrow, a new dawn awaited—a different world, and with it, the beginning of whatever came next.

It was a perfect spring weekend. In a luxurious neighborhood of Los Angeles, a long line of cars stretched down the street from early morning. A long-awaited ceremony was about to take place: the wedding of the founder of a prominent IT company. The event had been delayed for over two years due to the pandemic, pregnancy, and childbirth. The bride and groom were already a family, having welcomed a healthy baby girl, who coincidentally was celebrating her first birthday on the same day as her parents' wedding.

The ceremony venue was set up at a community center with floor-to-ceiling glass walls that beautifully blended the indoor and outdoor atmosphere. The doors were thrown wide open, revealing a sprawling garden decorated with white ribbons and fresh flowers. Tables and chairs were arranged for the reception, while a small stage featured a three-tiered cake at its center. Instead of elaborate toppers or candles, the cake was adorned with printed photos of the couple and their child—a simple yet heartwarming tribute to their family.

For an event hosted by one of America's top 100 corporate families, the wedding was remarkably informal. The music was upbeat and familiar, the food approachable and inviting. Hired security discreetly stayed in their vehicles or nearby buildings, and even patrolling police officers were warmly offered refreshments by the hosts.

Guests mingled in small groups, exchanging greetings and catching up. They admired family photos displayed around the venue and shared blessings for the couple's future. Colleagues from the couple's company had already launched drones to capture aerial shots of the wedding and enthusiastically barged into the bridal suite with action cameras in hand.

"Mom, guess who's here!"

The peculiar voice from the doorway made the bride look up. Dressed in an elegant white gown, the bride was none other than Yuna Hyun. She smiled warmly as she spotted her colleagues holding her daughter, who was wrapped in a tiny white dress complete with angel wings. **"Congratulations on your wedding!"** Her colleagues cheered in unison, handing the baby to Yuna

"Thank you, everyone."

Yuna replied, cradling her daughter tightly. The baby burst into laughter as soon as she was back in her mother's arms.

"My little angel. You look even more heavenly today."

Yuna whispered, gently rubbing her nose against the baby's. The child squealed in delight, her tiny hands exploring her mother's face. Her sparkling green eyes seemed particularly captivated by Yuna's dolled-up appearance. Yuna didn't mind as her makeup began to smudge under her baby's touch; she was entirely content in the moment. As she laughed and posed for photos with her friends, the groom, Noah, peeked into the room.

"Nahyun, your mom's here."

Yuna immediately stood up, smoothing her dress as two Korean women entered the bridal suite, led by Noah.

"Nahyun!"

"Mom? I thought you might not make it because of the flight cancellations."

Yuna exclaimed, taking her stepmother's hands in hers. She greeted her younger sister with a warm nod, who returned a smile while waving at Yuna's baby. The baby, recognizing her aunt from video calls, giggled innocently.

"It's your wedding. Of course, I had to be here. Eunhyun found a layover flight, and Noah even sent a car to pick us up from the airport."

"You must have had a hard trip. Thank you so much for coming. I'm so glad you made it. Riley, say hello. This is your grandmother."

"Hello, little one."

Yuna Hyun’s stepmother reached out her hand to Riley. The baby grabbed her finger and shook it as if they were old friends, drawing warm laughter from everyone watching.

“I’ll head out to finish preparing. See you later, Madam.”

Noah said, sensing the moment and leading Yuna’s colleagues out of the room. With the bustle gone, the bridal suite grew quiet, leaving Yuna, her stepmother, her younger sister, and Riley. The stepmother, enchanted by her granddaughter’s playful antics, finally turned her attention to Yuna, who looked as if all her worries and hardships had melted away. Seeing her stepdaughter’s serene smile brought a bittersweet expression to the older woman’s face.

“Your father would’ve been so proud of you today.”

“I’m sure he’s watching over us from above.”

Yuna replied with a gentle reassurance.

“I still feel so sorry. I wasn’t there for you when you needed me most. I left you so lonely.”

“That’s all in the past now. We agreed to stop apologizing, remember?”

Yuna said with a comforting smile. For her, the weight of those old wounds had long been shed. The future demanded a brighter focus, especially for Riley’s sake.

“Mom, come on! Why are you bringing the mood down on such a happy day?”

Her sister Eunhyun teased, attempting to lighten the atmosphere.

“Maybe I’m just missing your dad more because it’s such a special day,” her stepmother admitted with a sigh. She turned to Eunhyun. “You must’ve had a hard trip. Thank you for coming.”

Her sister, who bore a striking resemblance to their father, smiled kindly. “It’s nothing. I’m just glad to be here.”

Then, as if recalling something suddenly, Eunhyun added, “Oh, by the way, I think someone else came from Korea. Did you get a chance to say hi?”

Yuna froze. The statement took her completely by surprise. She had no friends in Korea—or at least none she expected to show up. Her connections from before university had long since faded, and she hadn’t sent invitations to her college classmates. The distance was too great, and she hadn’t hoped for anyone to make the journey.

Except for one person: Kwon Taekjoo.

She had mailed an invitation to his old address, the only one she had, and tried to follow up to confirm he had received it. But the call never connected, and her messages went unread.

When she finally tried to call again, she was met with the dreaded automated response: the number was no longer in service.

Eventually, she heard the news through their alumni group leader: it seemed Kwon Taekjoo had passed away. The cause of death was unclear, but the timing aligned with a string of global events—pandemic aftershocks, political unrest, and a violent coup that had shaken the region.

The coup brought back memories of the Russian diplomat Taekjoo once worked under. Could he have been caught in the chaos as well?

The loss hit Yuna hard. For days, she mourned the news, even as she neared the end of her pregnancy. Unable to travel to Korea herself, Noah had hired someone to confirm the details. What they found was grim: Taekjoo's resident registration had been canceled due to death, and the home he once shared with his mother was empty. Yuna's thoughts often drifted to his mother, left alone to endure such unimaginable losses—her husband, both sons, and now even her hope for the future.

"…Unnie?"

Eunhyun's voice snapped Yuna out of her reverie. Her stepmother's concerned gaze joined her sister's.

"I'm fine. I don't think there's anyone from Korea coming."

Yuna replied with a dismissive shake of her head. "

"Really?"

"Yeah. Maybe you just mistook someone. A lot of my colleagues are Asian American, after all."

"I guess that's possible."

Eunhyun murmured, scratching her head in uncertainty. Yuna tried to calm the sudden unease that had crept over her. The mention of a visitor from Korea had instantly conjured thoughts of Taekjoo, and she chastised herself for it. With a faint smile, she shook her head and let it go.

Just then, Riley let out a delighted squeal, her little arms stretching forward toward something.

"Riley? What's gotten you so excited all of a sudden?"

Yuna asked with a laugh, bumping her forehead lightly against her daughter's. But Riley wasn't looking at her mother. The baby's wide eyes were fixed on a spot behind Yuna, her chubby hands reaching eagerly toward it.

Yuna turned her head, puzzled, only to find… nothing. Not a person, not even a butterfly.

“What’s wrong?”

“…Nothing. I was just wondering what she’s looking at.”

“Should we take Riley? It seems like the ceremony is about to start.”

“Would you, Mom?”

“Of course, don’t even mention it.”

Her stepmother said with open arms, ready to take Riley. But just as Yuna moved to hand her daughter over, Riley squirmed and clung tightly, refusing to let go. Her eyes remained fixed on something behind Yuna. Curious and unsettled, Yuna turned fully to see what had captured her baby’s attention.

Her breath caught in her throat.

Two men were walking in the distance. Riley’s arms flailed as she let out excited squeals, reaching toward them. One of the men was tall with platinum-blond hair, and the other had jet-black hair. Though they were dressed sharply in suits, their casual, unhurried steps struck a chord of familiarity.

“Kwon Taekjoo…”

The name escaped her lips in a trembling whisper, as if it had a life of its own. Her heart pounded wildly. She knew it was impossible—Taekjoo was gone, confirmed to be dead. But the figure disappearing from view felt undeniably like him.

“Nahyun?”

“Unnie?”

“Ah, I… just wait…”

Yuna’s words tumbled out incoherently as she clutched Riley and rushed out of the room. The hem of her wedding dress dragged heavily across the floor, threatening to trip her with every hurried step. Her younger sister quickly grabbed the train of the dress, trying to steady her.

“What’s going on, unnie?”

“Nahyun, what are you doing?”

Just then, Noah appeared, heading toward the bridal suite to escort Yuna. His eyes widened as he saw her staggering forward, clutching Riley tightly to her chest. He asked, stepping in quickly to support her, his arms steadying both her and their daughter.

“Nahyun, what’s wrong?”

“Wait, wait—can I check the guestbook?”

“Of course.”

Without pressing further, Noah guided Yuna to the guestbook. By then, a few of the guests waiting outside had begun to notice her unusual demeanor.

Handing Riley over to Noah, Yuna turned the pages of the guestbook, working backward. Her fingers trembled, betraying her growing unease. She clenched her fists, opened them, and pressed her fingertips firmly against the pages, but it did little to steady her hands.

One page. Another. And then—she froze.

Noah, who had been quietly peering over her shoulder, let out a soft gasp.

“It’s in Korean?”

A sharp exhale escaped Yuna’s lips as she squeezed her eyes shut. When she reopened them, tears welled up, threatening to spill.

Congratulations on your wedding. Your baby looks healthy. Wishing you happiness.

The message was scrawled hastily, the handwriting unmistakably Kwon Taekjoo’s. Messy, unpolished, just as it had always been. She could almost hear him justifying his illegible scribbles back in college, brushing off criticism by insisting he had better things to do than worry about neat penmanship. There was no doubt—it was his.

“Nahyun? What’s going on?”

As tears brimmed in her eyes, Noah grew visibly anxious. Yuna’s stepmother, her sister, and Noah’s family quickly gathered around, their faces etched with concern. Even the guests whispered among themselves, asking if she was okay.

“No, it’s—it’s nothing.”

Yuna shook her head firmly and tried to smile, but the effort was short-lived. Tears spilled over, and she buried her face in the bouquet, muffling her quiet sobs.

Noah immediately wrapped her in a gentle embrace, holding her close as she trembled. Riley, sensing her mother’s distress, reached out her chubby hands to pat Yuna’s tear-streaked cheeks.

Yuna leaned into her daughter’s tiny hands, nuzzling them softly and planting a kiss on her fingers. Then, through her tears, she finally let the truth slip:

“I’m just…so happy. A friend I thought I’d never see again must have come by. I wished so much for them to be here.”

“That’s good to hear.”

Noah said, letting out a deep sigh of relief. He gently patted Yuna’s back, his touch reassuring. Those who had been worried for her exchanged soft smiles, the tension in the air

dissipating. When Yuna wiped her tears away, Noah slipped an arm around her waist and whispered, “Shall we start the ceremony now? Let’s make sure your friend’s blessings don’t go to waste.”

“Yeah.”

She replied with a radiant smile, her eyes still glistening but full of warmth. It was a smile that spoke of genuine happiness. Hand in hand with Noah and Riley, Yuna walked toward the cake at the center of the reception. But just as they reached it, she glanced back over her shoulder.

The space behind her was empty. The figures she thought she had seen—the ones she had desperately hoped to see—were gone. As if they had been nothing more than a mirage, a fleeting vision conjured by her heart.

Turning back, Yuna faced forward once more and took a steady step toward her future.

Be well, wherever you are, may you be free. And may you find happiness too, just as I have now.

"Only those in the same circle get to enjoy themselves."

Came a sudden grumble from behind a newspaper. The server, who was placing coffee and milk tea on the table, glanced over in confusion, trying to make sense of the complaint. As soon as the man folded the newspaper, his sharp eyes met the server's gaze. The man, an East Asian with a piercing stare, was none other than Kwon Taekjoo.

"Ah, I wasn’t talking to you."

The server, still looking uncomfortable, placed the milk tea and coffee on the table.

"Is there anything else you need?"

He glanced at Kwon Taekjoo with a subtle hint of disapproval. As he mulled over how much tip to give, Zhenya casually tossed a bill onto the table. The server, who picked it up instinctively, blinked in surprise. Zhenya waved a dismissive hand as he moved the milk tea toward himself, signaling for the server to leave.

"Feel free to call me anytime."

The server, his expression suddenly shifting, left without hesitation. Regardless, Zhenya calmly added two sugar cubes to his milk tea and stirred gently. Hooking his fingers around the delicate handle, he raised the cup and quietly savored the milk tea. It was an annoyingly elegant and aristocratic gesture.

“Who tips more than the cost of the meal, you bastard. Must have money to burn, huh?”

Unbothered by Taekjoo’s criticism, Zhenya continued sipping his milk tea with a satisfied slurp. After all, he had more money than he could ever spend in a lifetime. Wasting it freely

seemed as good a way as any to get rid of it, especially since it was ill-gotten wealth. Perhaps it was better to squander it completely. Besides, he was enjoying this luxurious refuge thanks to that very wealth. Taekjoo really had no grounds to complain.

Shortly after his attack on the Kremlin, Zhenya left Ajinokki. Not long after, news broke that the Russian president had died under mysterious circumstances. Though he worried he might be accused of being behind the assassination, Zhenya was confident that wouldn't happen. *"They wouldn't give me credit for something like that,"* he insisted.

It was suspicious, but events unfolded just as Zhenya had predicted. Russian media refrained from clarifying whether the president had died in an explosion, from illness, or due to some sudden, unexpected cause. Even the interim government made no effort to identify the perpetrator of an assassination. Only outside Russia did the sudden death of the nation's top leader spark noisy speculation. Rumors and conjectures ran rampant, while people across Russia began to voice their dissent and stage protests against years of oppression. The resulting political chaos allowed Zhenya to slip out of the country relatively easily.

Still, the thought lingered—what if he was eventually framed for assassinating the president? It would mean he could never return to Russia, his homeland, or to Ajinoki, the place where he and Taekjoo had spent so much time together. The thought of never going back was a bitter one, and Zhenya likely felt the same.

"Are you really okay with this? You liked that island, didn't you? What if someone else takes over while you're gone? And didn't you hide 'Anastasia' there?"

"The system will keep running smoothly without me, so it doesn't matter. Even if someone manages to break through the security system and invade, it'll be the same. Without knowing how to operate 'Anastasia,' it's just a heap of scrap metal."

Much like how Anna Anderson, who once claimed to be "Anastasia," was an ordinary woman until she presented evidence and testimony to support her identity.

"...Are you sure you're okay? It's only a matter of time before they figure out it was you."

"It doesn't add up for the Kremlin to have been hit by my attack. The timing doesn't match."

"Are you disappointed you couldn't become a murderer because there was nothing to lose?"

"Not that. I'm more disappointed I couldn't introduce him to 'Anastasia.' Either way, if someone was involved in his death, we'll be safe for a while. So, relax, Taekjoo."

Zhenya's optimism was unshakable, even baseless. He seemed confident, almost certain, that someone else had assassinated the president. Taekjoo, too, had a vague sense of the circumstances at play. The clearest clue was the immediate suspension of every major state project the president had initiated following his death. The same went for the wars justified by the recovery of imperial territories or retaliation against terrorism.

It seemed likely that someone who disagreed with the president's agenda had taken advantage of the chaos to eliminate him. The absence of a clear power shift afterward suggested that the

assassin was one of the existing power players.

Of course, the revelation that the assassin was Bazim came as a surprise. Bazim was widely known as the president's confidant and loyal ally. The president's authority was also his own, meaning there was little reason for him to risk a coup. But perhaps the perpetual role of second-in-command had started to chafe.

Thanks to Bazim's solid grip on power—or perhaps the influence of the Bogdanov family backing him—no one questioned the circumstances of the president's death. It was hard to imagine such silence even if the president had died of a heart attack.

While Russia's turmoil settled, Zhenya and Taekjoo roamed the globe, frequently switching passports to avoid detection. From Central Asia to Africa, Europe, and countless small island nations, they traversed the world, eventually arriving in the United States after a year.

Though they called it hiding or fleeing, it was, in truth, a luxurious journey. They mingled with tourists to visit historical sites and landmarks, spent a month on a cruise, and secluded themselves in a remote mountain cabin for days at a time, enjoying quiet moments together. They even dove into a newly launched online game, dominating an entire server side by side.

Initially, they lived in constant tension, fearing pursuit. The mere sight of patrolling soldiers or police was enough to set them on edge. But as time passed, their unease gradually faded. No one seemed to be chasing them, and they encountered no restrictions on their movements. In time, they grew accustomed to this *life where nothing happened*.

Their visit to the United States was purely to attend Yuna Hyun's wedding. With nothing pressing on their schedules and effectively unemployed, they had no excuse not to celebrate her big day. While Zhenya grumbled about it, he was surprisingly meticulous when it came to choosing his outfit. Taekjoo lost count of how many times he had to change clothes due to Zhenya's peculiar stubbornness.

"Hey, enough already. Are we the ones getting married?"

"Why, would you like that?"

"What kind of creepy nonsense is that? I'm just saying let's throw on something simple and go."

"How long are you planning to hide your true feelings, Taekjoo?"

Zhenya, claiming there was no need for some grand proposal, had suddenly clung to him. Swept along by Zhenya's whims, Taekjoo found himself in a cramped fitting room, where things escalated. He should have known better than to enter a space so close-quartered with him in the first place. But the way the white suit, designed for formal occasions, fit Zhenya like a second skin—it was irresistible. And so, it happened. Now, sipping coffee that had gone appropriately cold, Taekjoo reflected on that embarrassing memory with a sense of regret.

At the cafeteria they'd stopped at for breakfast, Taekjoo had come across a newspaper someone had left behind. On the front page was an article about the Russian presidential election. Not that there was much to call an election—everyone knew Bazim would be the next president. That's just how the country was built, and how it functioned.

"How do you feel?"

"Hm?"

Zhenya tilted his head at the sudden question, puzzled. Propping his chin on his arm, Taekjoo smirked mischievously.

"Becoming family to the next president—how does that feel?"

"What does that have to do with me?"

"When a new president takes office, even their distant relatives, friends of friends, and anyone remotely connected to them end up living the high life. That's why everyone scrambles to get their people elected. And here we are—teasing you about being a prince or some noble, and now you've practically become actual royalty."

"It has nothing to do with me. This was entirely Bazim's choice."

"Sure, of course."

Taekjoo's doubtful gaze lingered, prompting Zhenya to shrug nonchalantly.

"Still, I can't say there's absolutely nothing about it that pleases me."

"See? Deep down, you like it too, don't you?"

"Bazim's always been lenient as long as no one meddles with what's his. Actually, he's never cared about anything except his rivals. I don't need power, and Bazim—being the kind of guy who prefers practicality—would see a blood relative like me as a shield, not a threat. That means no more annoying pests swarming around me."

"That only works if you don't go head-to-head with him."

"No, Bazim wouldn't let it come to that. He's more scared than you'd think—always worrying about what he could lose."

"Lenient, as long as no one covets what's his, huh... Does that apply even if his reputation takes a hit because of you?"

"Reputation?"

"You know, public officials often lose everything because of scandals caused by those close to them—parents, siblings, kids, that kind of thing. And let's not forget, you happen to be an internationally infamous troublemaker. You cut off people's heads like you're trimming bean

sprouts, wreck everything around you when you're in a bad mood, and on top of that, you've got a same-sex lover—a relationship your country really hates."

Taekjoo chuckled as he spoke, half-joking, half-serious. Zhenya, unbothered, responded calmly.

"If anyone dares to make an issue out of it..."

"If anyone dares to make an issue out of it, then what?"

"We just get rid of Bazim."

Was that really something to say so casually? Taekjoo couldn't help but glance around nervously.

Just then, Zhenya's phone buzzed, breaking the moment. Startled, Taekjoo jumped in his seat.

"Ah, shit. That scared me."

While Taekjoo visibly flinched, Zhenya only shifted his eyes toward the phone, showing no intention of answering it. Curious, Taekjoo leaned over and peeked at the screen.

"Who is it?" he asked. The caller ID displayed none other than Bazim's name.

"Hey, this bastard—did he bug your phone or something?"

"Impossible."

"Then how do you explain this creepy timing? The moment we start talking about him, he calls right away."

"I'm telling you, it's impossible."

Zhenya responded firmly once more. For someone who constantly eavesdropped and spied on others, declaring with such certainty that no one could do the same to him was audaciously hypocritical. Still, he likely had reason to feel so confident. Looking back, those who had tried to track Zhenya in the past rarely met a good end. Even with the advanced technology of national intelligence agencies, tapping Zhenya's communications seemed almost impossible. It was clear—while he might be unsettling as an enemy, there was no one more reliable to have on your side.

"Aren't you going to answer?"

"You can just ignore it."

"It's been almost a year since he called, right?"

"So what?"

"What if something happened to your elderly father?"

"Even then, it doesn't matter."

Still, for him to dismiss news about his father like that—was there really no reason for such information to reach him? Was he being treated like just another child to be put aside, or had they mutually decided to pretend the other didn't exist? The more Taekjoo thought about it, the more he wondered what kind of family this was.

Leaning his chin on his arm, Taekjoo stared at Zhenya in silence. Suddenly, he reached out and pressed the call button on Zhenya's phone without warning.

"It's me."

As the call connected, Bazim's voice came through the speaker. Zhenya didn't respond, simply folding his arms and waiting it out. Taekjoo, equally indifferent, stared at Zhenya, then switched the phone to speaker mode. He gestured with his eyes, urging Zhenya to answer.

"...What is it?"

Zhenya finally responded reluctantly.

"Where are you?"

"There's no reason to tell you."

"How about you start heading back?"

"What's with this now? After having your fun while I was gone, what's making you want to contact me?"

"Your father's health has gotten much worse."

"So? Oh, and tell Volodya congratulations. Looks like the day when we won't have to care about that old man's opinion isn't far off."

Was Zhenya really so indifferent to the possibility of his father's death? Given what the Bogdanov family had done to him, Taekjoo could almost understand his resentment, but he still worried whether Zhenya would have second thoughts later. What exactly was wrong with Vissarion? Was it just old age? Zhenya's mention of "Volodya" referred to his older brother, Vladimir's nickname. It seemed like Zhenya was perhaps a little closer to him than the others. Listening in on their conversation, Taekjoo couldn't help but feel a flicker of curiosity.

With a deep sigh, Bazim persisted, trying to persuade Zhenya once again.

"If you ever change your mind, come back. I've taken care of everything here. I promise I won't go near your island anymore. If you want, I'll arrange a place for you anywhere..."

"Why? Are you starting to get scared now that you can't see me?"

"..."

“Are you so anxious you can’t stand it, wondering when and how I’ll come destroy your things?”

"Yevgeny."

Was Bazim really trying to bring Zhenya back for such an obvious reason? They say that when you reach the peak of power, you start to watch your surroundings carefully, but now he wanted to keep the biggest threat right in his sights? The truth was, unseen enemies often caused the greatest fear.

How could humans be this shameless? Not only did they push a child into a trap to elevate their family’s prestige, but they also used him for their dirty work, all while coveting his weapons and trying to steal them through force. And did they ever offer an apology? No, of course not.

"You still haven’t learned your lesson. When you ask something of others, an apology should come first."

Taekjoo, who had been listening, suddenly interrupted. The unexpected yet familiar voice seemed to make Bazim hesitate.

"...And you?"

“Don’t waste your time with nonsense. If you want something from him, show some real effort. I warned you, didn’t I? Don’t try to play games.”

Taekjoo, who had cut the conversation off abruptly, hung up the phone on his own. Zhenya looked at him with an expression of disbelief.

“When did you get so close to Bazim, Taekjoo?”

“Is that the point? We just had a few run-ins before.”

“You ran into each other?”

“Ugh, that’s just how I’m phrasing it. What exactly are you imagining? What’s wrong with you? Watching dramas with my mom has clearly messed with your head.”

“When did you meet him?”

Zhenya's interrogation continued, his eyes narrowing as if trying to uncover the truth. It was a misunderstanding that often happened when translating common Korean expressions directly into Russian. Taekjoo sighed deeply and answered obediently.

“We just ran into each other at a terrorism site. I visited him briefly even before I went to pick you up.”

“You went to see Bazim? For what?”

“What do you mean 'for what'? I went to warn him that if he touched you again, I wouldn’t let it slide.”

At the blunt reply, Zhenya's blue eyes widened in surprise. A bad feeling crept over him, and he raised his hand, shouting, “Wait!”. Before it could even make sense, Zhenya darted across the table and threw himself onto Taekjoo, pulling him into a hug. The cup and dishes that had been knocked over slid across the floor. The loud noise drew the attention of everyone in the cafeteria, who turned to watch the two.

“Hey, everyone’s watching, this is embarrassing.”

“Sigh... Taekjoo...”

Zhenya, undeterred by the surrounding stares, rubbed his face against Taekjoo’s neck, murmuring his name repeatedly with a look of pure joy. He couldn’t hide his emotional reaction, as if someone had just done him an immense favor. It was hard to believe that a grown man was acting like this, over something so trivial.

“You’re getting more spoiled by the day, you brat.”

Taekjoo muttered with a hint of a grin, giving Zhenya’s back a gentle pat. Maybe, just maybe, it was his own doing that had shaped Zhenya into this way. After all, he had no choice but to stick by his side and take responsibility until Zhenya was back to his usual self.

Taekjoo's sharp gaze met those of the onlookers in the café. The cold stares made everyone slowly avert their eyes, unease spreading across their faces. Even the server who had come to clean up took a step back and quietly retreated.

"Hey, stop acting so shamelessly here..."

Taekjoo gently stopped Zhenya, who was pressing his lips against his cheek and ear. If left unchecked, Zhenya would probably make a scene, oblivious to the people around them. Of course, even if Taekjoo tried to stop him, Zhenya wasn’t likely to listen easily.

Zhenya kept planting little kisses on Taekjoo’s cheek, inching closer to his lips. Taekjoo, in a subtle move, turned his head away, desperately trying to avoid his advance.

"Hey, are you even listening?"

Taekjoo held his ground, then finally called Zhenya's name.

"Zhenya."

His words hung in the air, sounding almost like a gentle plea or coaxing. Zhenya hesitated, raising his head. Their eyes locked, as expected.

"How about we go to Korea?"

Taekjoo casually suggested, as though it were no more than a simple thought, almost like he was suggesting they head back to their accommodation. The sudden proposal left Zhenya

with a puzzled expression, as though he wasn’t sure if he had heard correctly.

"Suddenly?"

"If it's just for kimchi stew and a warm sauna, we don’t really need to be in Korea, do we?"

"But I’m sure my mom’s been missing you, even if she doesn’t say it, right?”

Taekjoo played his final card, bringing up his mother. At that, Zhenya, who had been wearing an inscrutable expression up until now, let out a small *"Hmm,"* sinking into thought. For all his posturing, Zhenya couldn't ignore the one person who had shown him unconditional kindness—Taekjoo's mother.

No matter the situation, she had always been warm and welcoming toward Zhenya, never judging or questioning. To Zhenya, she was likely the only person outside of Taekjoo with whom he'd ever shared even a shred of emotional connection. That thought seemed to weigh on him, however lightly.

"Still can't shake off that mama's boy streak, huh?"

"I told you, it's not like that."

"No need to be embarrassed. If you missed the comfort of a little woman’s embrace, you could’ve just said so.”

Zhenya quipped, stepping back with an amused grin. As always, he twisted the meaning of any comment to suit himself. Taekjoo sighed, recognizing there was no point in arguing further.

Zhenya smirked and bit his lip. His voice sounded as crisp as ever as he rose to his feet, *“Let's go.”*

A suburban neighborhood in Ontario, Canada. Though the calendar marked the early days of fall, snow blanketed the ground, as if winter had already staked its claim. In this region, where nearly half the year seemed to belong to winter, early autumn snowfalls were no longer a surprise. Two years of living here had taught Kwon Taekjoo's mother to expect as much.

She stood by the frost-covered window, her breath fogging up the glass as she gazed outside. Normally, this was the time when the mail would arrive—a routine she had come to anticipate daily. Yet today, the streets were eerily quiet, with far fewer cars passing by than usual. The mail carrier was nowhere in sight. Her eyes searched the distant road, hoping to catch a glimpse of the familiar postal van, but not even a vehicle resembling it came into view. The morning news had warned of early snowstorms causing road closures, a situation now playing out before her eyes.

She had spent the early hours of the day clearing snow from the driveway, but it seemed futile. The snowfall was relentless, undoing her efforts almost as quickly as they were

completed. According to the news, snowplows wouldn't begin clearing the main roads until the afternoon. How long she would have to wait was anyone's guess.

"Hey, standing guard like that won't make it arrive any faster. Come over here and have some tea."

Unable to bear the sight any longer, Taekjoo's aunt spoke up, calling her younger sister away from the window where she stood, endlessly waiting. Taekjoo's mother responded with a soft "Alright," yet remained rooted in the same spot, unwilling to budge.

About a year ago, an unexpected call came from Taekjoo. Without much explanation, he asked her to stay in Canada a while longer until he could come and get her himself. He assured her there was nothing to worry about, that all issues had been resolved, but that he simply needed some time. He also emphasized that he was safer than anyone and urged her not to fret. Lastly, he promised to share everything openly and honestly when they met again.

After hanging up, she immediately tried calling Taekjoo, but all she got was a message saying the number was no longer in service. She then attempted to reach Zhenya, but his line was also disconnected. Feeling increasingly uneasy, she turned to Jongwoo for answers. Jongwoo offered a vague response: *"If it's him, you can trust he'll keep his promise. Please, just wait this time."*

Taekjoo's mother hesitated for a moment before asking just one question.

"Is the Ambassador with my Taekjoo as well?"

"Yes, most likely."

It was around the time when news broke that the Kremlin had been suddenly attacked and the president had died. She was concerned that Zhenya might have been involved or that the aftermath could have caused some problems for him, but no further news had come through. After some deliberation, she decided, for the first time, to trust her son. The fact that he wasn't alone but was with Zhenya strangely put her mind at ease.

Life in Canada continued fairly steadily after that. Her sister had fully recovered her health, and since there was no one she needed to take care of, she was able to enjoy some peace of mind. Living in an environment almost completely cut off from the outside world, there were no stresses to deal with, and the time passed by pleasantly. The two sisters had always been very close since childhood, and even just chatting with each other made the day go by quickly.

In the meantime, postcards started arriving sporadically. There was no sender's name. They just contained brief updates written in an illegible handwriting. Occasionally, even Kwon Taekjoo himself couldn't read his own writing, but his mother could always decipher it easily.

The photos on the postcards showed different backgrounds each time. They were all sent just before Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya left the respective cities.

The last piece of mail she received wasn’t a postcard but a letter. It said that they had arrived in the United States and would likely stay there for about a week. Along with the letter was an unexpected instant photo: a picture of a joyful Asian bride surrounded by many people. It was taken from a distance, and she had to stare at it for a while before realizing that the bride was Yoo Nahyun, Kwon Taekjoo’s university classmate. She recalled hearing that Nahyun had been living in the U.S. and was about to get married. She remembered the wedding had been postponed for various reasons, but now it seemed that she had a lovely baby as well.

Just looking at the photo, the overwhelming joy seemed to radiate through it. Was Kwon Taekjoo feeling the same way? If he had attended his friend's wedding, it seemed that his life was stable, which put her at ease.

There was one more photo in the envelope. She absentmindedly flipped it over and let out a soft gasp.

"Goodness."

It looked like a selfie taken by Zhenya. Kwon Taekjoo was standing behind him, adjusting his tie while looking into the mirror. It seemed like they were getting ready to attend Yoo Nahyun's wedding. Kwon Taekjoo wore a simple white shirt with a black jacket, while Zhenya wore a flowing silk shirt and a white jacket adorned with intricate gold embroidery. The two of them were dressed in a way that could easily make one believe they were the stars of the wedding themselves.

She was slowly beginning to wait for the next letter. She wondered if the two of them were still in the United States, or if they had already moved on to another country.

"Hey, the tea is getting cold."

"Yeah, I know."

Her sister's persistent nagging made her turn away, but she couldn't shake off the feeling and looked out the window again.

"...Sister, I think I should head home now."

While keeping her gaze fixed on the window, Taekjoo's mother murmured, her lips moving as if in a dream, her tone lacking any sense of reality. Her sister, with a puzzled expression, raised a question.

"Suddenly?"

"Yeah. I think it's about time."

"Won't you feel lonely going by yourself? Isn't Taekjoo away on a trip?"

Instead of answering, Taekjoo’s mother smiled gently. Her eyes remained fixed on the window. Her sister, still puzzled, walked over and looked outside. There, through the snow piled up to waist height, her nephew was walking toward the house. Following him was a tall, handsome foreigner, easily over two meters tall. The two of them seemed to be bickering

as they made their way home. Watching them, Taekjoo’s mother smiled more warmly than ever.

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Chapter End Notes

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The Answer Is

Chapter Notes

The characters will communicate in different languages.

•RUSSIAN DIALOGUES ARE IN *ITALICS*
•ENGLISH DIALOGUES ARE IN **BOLD**
•KOREAN DIALOGUES ARE NOT FORMATTED

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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As expected, Chuseok was approaching. Taekjoo's mother, determined to make some jeon for the holiday, went out to do the shopping. It was right after she had finished cleaning the house, which had been left untouched for several days. Exhausted from the work, Taekjoo had tried to convince her to just buy food this year, but he couldn't break her strong resolve.

Taekjoo followed his mother with a look of utter boredom. Neither of them expected anything more from him than carrying the bags. With the major holiday of Chuseok approaching, the market was crowded with people. The throngs of people moving in and out created such a large crowd that Taekjoo had to practically push his way through. It was nearly impossible to walk without bumping into others.

In the midst of all this, his mother, who had mentioned wanting to fry some jeon, stopped at every shop. Her hands were so full with the ingredients she bought that she had no fingers left to spare. Was she really planning to set up a feast? It seemed like everything was happening because of an uninvited guest who had come without any notice.

“Oh? What’s this? Are these also 'side dishes'? Korean food really has a lot of red dishes, huh?”

The guest, chattering nonstop while walking arm in arm with his mother, was none other than Olga. There hadn't been a word from her in a while, but this morning, she suddenly appeared dressed in a hanbok. She had even adorned herself with jade rings and traditional hair accessories. Where on earth did she find those things?

"All of these are kimchi."

"These are all kimchi? You're lying."

"There are so many varieties, right? In fact, there are said to be over a hundred kinds. I read in a book that it can go that far. Do you have anything like this in Russia?"

The mother eagerly explained about the kimchi, naming each type and its main ingredients as Olga pointed them out. Just like how she communicated with Zhenya using only Korean and Russian, the conversation flowed easily with Olga as well. At this point, it almost seemed like the mother might have secretly learned Russian without anyone noticing.

"Don't worry, Taekjoo. I'll send that back tonight, no matter what."

Standing next to him, Zhenya calmly stared at his sister and assured him. Despite being in the same position as a porter, he wasn't holding a single bag.

“...I think it’ll be difficult.”

“Are you doubting me?”

No. Just look at the mood of our mother and all these bags. I have a feeling you’ll be stuck here for at least two nights and three days. She’ll probably make you gain at least 3 kg before she lets you go.

With a resigned look, he took another step forward. Zhenya, still glaring at his younger sibling disapprovingly, reluctantly followed behind.

As they walked affectionately with their mother, Olga suddenly pointed to a shop.

“Oh? I know this! It's "Hotteok," right? Korean traditional pancakes!”

"That's right, Hotteok. Want to try one?"

Before Olga could even respond, Taekjoo’s mom had already ordered the Hotteok. The freshly baked pancake was handed to them in a paper cup. Olga took it eagerly, snapping a few pictures to share.

"Ambassador, you should try one too."

She offered one to Zhenya as well. He flashed a smile, almost too good to be true, and casually accepted the Hotteok. After sniffing it for a moment, he seemed to decide it was safe to eat and opened his mouth without hesitation. Taekjoo quickly stopped him.

"Hey, wait. You can't eat that right away."

Zhenya looked at Taekjoo with a puzzled expression as he suddenly stopped him. He glanced at him up and down, as if trying to figure out his intention. Taekjoo was about to warn him that it was hot and to be careful, but before he could say anything, he suddenly held out his Hotteok right in front of Taekjoo’s face.

"What?"

"Isn't this what I'm supposed to do?"

"What are you talking about, all of a sudden?"

"In your country, isn't it polite to offer it to the elder first?"

Taekjoo couldn't help but let out a surprised "Oh!" at Zhenya's unexpected words. It was surprising and even a bit endearing to hear Zhenya, of all people, talk about manners. Zhenya gently brought the Hotteok to Taekjoo's lips and added with a smirk.

"I've seen it often in the dramas the little woman likes to watch. Couples do this kind of thing all the time."

Soon, Zhenya closed his eyes and smiled gently.

Is that what you call a gesture of affection? That's probably why you kept offering me ramen, Taekjoo.

It had always been a joke when he fed him ramen. The way he pretended it wasn't spicy when it clearly was had been amusing and cute. But if he wanted to misunderstand the intention, there was no need to correct him.

Taekjoo continued to blow on the hotteok, his breath brushing over it. Zhenya, watching quietly, tilted his head in confusion.

"You're being silly, Taekjoo."

"Silly? It's not silly. It's actually pretty hot on the inside, despite how it looks on the outside. If you eat it without thinking, you'll burn the roof of your mouth and your tongue. Now, eat it."

"Hot on the inside despite how it looks… is that your way of saying it's spicy?"

"What kind of nonsense is that?!"

Taekjoo's outburst caused Olga and his mother to blink in surprise, their eyes widening. Passersby in the market turned their heads, eyeing the two of them curiously. Feeling the sudden attention, Taekjoo awkwardly smiled and nodded his head a few times. But despite the awkwardness, Zhenya continued to happily turn the hotteok from side to side, grinning with satisfaction. The way he looked so pleased, with his face lit up and his jaw slightly lifted, made Taekjoo realize once again that Zhenya had probably misunderstood something in his usual, carefree manner.

"...What's this about?"

"So you can't stand it unless we do something like an indirect kiss? I didn't know you were that desperate. If you want a kiss, you can just say so honestly."

Seriously, every time you open your mouth, it's nonsense.

Despite Taekjoo's obvious discomfort, Zhenya happily took a bite of the hotteok. As he savored the perfectly cooled treat, he looked down at Taekjoo with a teasing smirk. He stuck

out his red tongue and licked the sticky filling off his lips, as if savoring every moment. Taekjoo had gone through the trouble of cooling the hotteok to avoid burns, only for Zhenya to think it was some kind of flirty gesture. Taekjoo was about to snap back, but he could already feel his blood pressure rising, so he simply shook his head and marched ahead. Zhenya followed leisurely, still laughing at Taekjoo, teasing him for being embarrassed.

Meanwhile, Taekjoo's mother entered a nearby rice cake shop. She had come to buy the rice flour for making songpyeon. The shop owner recognized her and greeted her warmly.

"Ah, welcome!"

"How have you been?"

"Oh, yes, of course! I was wondering where you'd been. I hadn't seen you in a while and was worried you might be unwell."

"Oh, I just went to visit my sister for a bit."

"Right, you mentioned your sister lives abroad, didn't you? But, who is this person with you...?"

The rice cake shop owner, who had been exchanging pleasantries with Taekjoo's mother, looked at Olga with a puzzled expression as she kept taking pictures. After scanning Olga from head to toe, the shop owner quickly made a judgment, even before Taekjoo's mother could respond.

"Oh my, oh my! She must be your daughter-in-law, right? Is your son finally getting married?"

"Ah... does it look that way?"

Taekjoo's mother gave a vague response, which deepened the misunderstanding. Olga, oblivious to the confusion, just kept smiling brightly. The shop owner and Taekjoo's mother, seeing her, couldn't help but shower her with compliments, saying how beautiful she looked.

"Mom, I told you, we could just buy the rice cakes."

Just as they arrived at the rice cake shop, Taekjoo made his final remark. The shop owner looked between him and Olga, smiling approvingly.

"Oh, you two look so good together. A perfect match, like a handsome young man and a beautiful woman."

A chill ran down his spine. Slowly, like a rusted machine, he turned around. Zhenya was casually munching on his hotteok with an uninterested expression. When their eyes met, he raised an eyebrow as if to ask, "What do you have to say about that?" Taekjoo let out a quiet sigh of relief, brushing his chest with his hand. He couldn't help but worry that if Zhenya understood the comment a moment ago, the entire market — not just the rice cake shop — might have exploded. Zhenya had a tendency to pretend he didn't care while secretly being quite jealous.

Olga, who had been smiling constantly, asked Taekjoo what the conversation had been about.

"Taekjoo, what were they talking about?"

"You don't need to know."

"Hmm? Should I use a translator? If I use a translator, your mother will find out about it, and would that be okay with you?"

Olga lightly shook her phone in front of him. Taekjoo knew he had to prevent his mother from finding out about the translator, especially because of Zhenya, who had no filter when it came to speaking in front of her.

"...It seems like they mistook you for my fiancée."

"Are you crazy?"

"It wasn't me, it was them, just assuming things..."

Olga raised her hand as if she didn't want to hear more, then tapped her forehead and pretended to feel dizzy.

"Ah, I think I heard something too uncomfortable. I feel awkward now."

"Hey, I'm not happy about it either, you know."

"Of course. Taekjoo likes men."

"No, I don't like men..."

His temples throbbed. It felt like the blood flow to his head had temporarily surged. He almost retorted angrily but decided it would just be a pointless argument, so he gave up. Just then, his mother came out of the shop.

"Well, take care. Enjoy the holiday."

"Yes, be careful on your way back."

Olga gently covered the top of her hanbok with her hand and bowed, following his mother. Taekjoo, who had just been handed 5 more kilograms of burden, clicked his tongue and followed them. The rice cake shop owner came out to see them off and winked at Taekjoo.

"Finally doing some filial duty, huh? Your mother's lifelong wish was to see you with a bride. Just make sure you live happily and take care of her."

It seemed like Taekjoo's mother hadn't corrected the misunderstanding. He felt a twinge of unease but tried to hide it. He awkwardly smiled, then pulled Zhenya's collar, signaling for him to move. Zhenya obediently followed, but his eyes stayed fixed on the rice cake shop.

"What, you little shit?"

"Why does that woman keep smiling at you?"

"She was giving me well wishes. Telling me to live happily."

Taekjoo extended his hand toward Zhenya, who still didn't quite understand what he meant and just stared blankly. Taekjoo gently tickled the back of his hand with his thumb, prompting Zhenya to finally grasp his hand, albeit hesitantly. As a result, one of Taekjoo's arms was freed up. It wasn't that he wanted Zhenya to do things without asking; it was more about teaching him through subtle hints, hoping that it would stick.

"Here, carry some of the load, too. Let's see if we can live happily as we said."

Smiling, Taekjoo gently tugged on Zhenya's hand, subtly drawing him closer. Zhenya, who had been staring blankly, suddenly lunged forward. Taekjoo quickly turned his head, narrowly avoiding the collision. Zhenya wasn't ready to give up, though, and stubbornly followed, still attempting to close the distance. Taekjoo, now being tugged by Zhenya's hand, had his range of movement restricted. After a while of dodging, both of them were out of breath, their shoulders heaving with the effort. They stood there, each refusing to back down, glaring at one another.

"Haah... haah... Everyone's watching, you crazy bastard!"

"You proposed in front of everyone and now you're acting like this?"

"Who the hell proposed?!"

Before he could even finish his sentence, Zhenya pounced, catching him off guard. Taekjoo stumbled backward, his feet tangling, and he crashed toward the emergency stairs of the building. Zhenya immediately followed, toppling over him, and their lips met. The bags in their hands fell to the ground with a loud thud. Thankfully, Zhenya managed to grab Taekjoo by the nape of his neck, preventing any serious injury. Was he supposed to consider himself lucky for that?

Taekjoo shot Zhenya an annoyed look, then, in frustration, pulled his head in for an embrace. At this point, it was already done, so there was nothing else to do but let things happen. Zhenya let out a warm, sweet breath as his neck vibrated.

Passersby didn't notice the two hidden by the staircase and continued on their way, oblivious. The surroundings remained as noisy and bustling as ever, as if nothing had happened at all.

"How old are you, exactly, that you keep tripping and falling? Watch where you're going when you walk."

His mother launched into a full-on scolding while tidying up the bruised fruit. Thanks to Zhenya's overly enthusiastic display of affection, both Taekjoo's body and belongings were in a sorry state. Feeling awkward, Kwon Taekjoo grumbled as he pulled out a broken leek and some thoroughly smashed onions from his bag.

"I'm telling you, it was because there were so many people. I was trying not to fall and ended up hurting myself even worse. But honestly, Mom, you're so cold. Aren't you worried about your injured son?"

"Worried? You're a grown man scraping up his knees like a kid. That's what I should be worried about? How much longer are you going to be so clumsy? Really! Put that down and go disinfect it!"

His attempt to complain only earned him an even sharper scolding. Meanwhile, Zhenya and Olga sat nearby, sipping their tea noisily, watching the mother and son with mild amusement.

"Judging by how fiery she still is, she hasn't aged a bit. Her voice has only gotten stronger."

"What are you mumbling about? Go put some medicine on it already!"

"Fine, I'm going, I'm going."

Defeated by his mother's relentless nagging, Taekjoo reluctantly got up. He had just stepped out of the kitchen when the doorbell rang. He walked over to the intercom and looked at the screen, where the grinning face of Yoon Jongwoo filled the display.

"Madam! It's me! Jongwoo's here!"

Jongwoo shouted loud enough for the entire apartment complex to hear. Taekjoo glared at the screen with a less-than-pleased expression.

"What's this? Mom, did you invite him too?"

From the kitchen, his mother shouted back, "Jongwoo's parents went on a trip to Europe. He said he'd be spending the holiday alone, so I told him to come over and at least have a meal with us."

As if that was all the explanation needed. Taekjoo squinted suspiciously, clearly unimpressed with the idea.

"That's such a lie, total nonsense."

Taekjoo muttered as he begrudgingly made his way to the front door. For some reason, holidays always turned into a revolving door for people like Zhenya, Olga, and Yoon Jongwoo, who treated his house like their own. By now, it felt more like an annual tradition.

When he opened the door, Yoon Jongwoo stood there beaming, holding a fruit basket in one hand and a large bouquet of flowers in the other.

"Sunbae! It's been a while! How have you been?"

Jongwoo offered a standard greeting, his eyes darting around as if searching for something—or someone. When he didn't spot what he was looking for, he craned his neck and peered into the house. Taekjoo, with zero hesitation, snatched the gifts out of his hands.

"Thanks for these. I'll let Mom know you stopped by. Have a great holiday, and travel safely."

"What? You're telling me to leave already?"

"Holidays are for spending time with your family, you know."

With a grin, Taekjoo began ushering Jongwoo out the door, giving him a playful shove. But Jongwoo, flustered, grabbed onto the doorframe and held his ground.

"Wait, wait! Hold on! Your mom invited me over for a meal! I haven't even said hello to her yet. How can you kick me out like this, Sunbae?"

"And I told you I'd pass the message along, didn't I?"

Just as Taekjoo's teasing reached its peak, someone approached. It was Olga.

"Jongwoo!"

The moment Jongwoo heard her voice, his face lit up like a child on Christmas morning. Of course, Taekjoo thought, *that's his real reason for showing up.* Jongwoo, as if fueled by superhuman determination, wriggled free from Taekjoo's grip and stood face-to-face with Olga. His eyes, nose, and mouth seemed ready to melt right off his face from excitement.

"It's been a while. How have you been?"

"I've been great! How about you, Miss Olga? Have you been doing okay? How's your health?"

"My health? Oh, it's always the same, you know. What can I do? I was born with a tragic destiny."

"Miss Olga…"

"I don't think the life of a frail beauty is so bad, personally."

"Well, that's true."

"What do you mean, 'well, that's true'?"

Taekjoo scolded Jongwoo, who was completely mesmerized and nodding along like a fool. But neither Olga, who clasped her hands as if she were a tragic heroine, nor Jongwoo, who seemed ready to give up his heart and soul for her, paid any attention to his words.

"By the way, how do I look today?"

Olga suddenly dropped her melancholy act, spreading her arms wide and twirling on the spot. Jongwoo clapped enthusiastically, showering her with praise.

"Wow, Miss Olga! You look like a goddess dressed like that."

It was too much for Taekjoo to endure. He shoved Jongwoo inside with a swift kick to his rear.

"Cut it out already. It’s disgusting to watch."

"What did I do, Sunbae?"

"You shameless idiot. Stop blocking the doorway and get inside."

Jongwoo pouted and then handed over an envelope. Taekjoo, short on hands, couldn’t grab it immediately and instead asked, "What’s this?"

"It’s your new ID and related documents, Sunbae."

"Oh, they’re ready already?"

"Already? It’s more like ‘finally.’ You’ve been dealing with so much hassle because of this. The process took longer since it had to be handled discreetly."

For years, both while wandering abroad and after returning to Korea, Taekjoo had lived with a provisional identity. Having spent much of his life as an operative, assuming false identities felt natural. Yet, reclaiming his true identity brought with it a strange sense of closure.

It felt like a pause button had been pressed on his life years ago, only for things to restart again briefly—only to stop permanently a year ago. It was his own decision, one he didn’t regret, but the moment still stirred an odd mix of emotions.

"Can this really be called a new life? You know, the Director knows, and anyone else involved would know too."

"Maybe for now, but time will take care of that, don’t you think? Officially, your past life has been closed off. At least now, no matter what crisis hits the country, you won’t be dragged into it. Doesn’t that feel like a relief? Or… do you miss it? I mean, your education, your career—everything’s gone."

"None of it really matters anymore."

"The Director said to live a good life. Don’t let your past come back to haunt you."

Jongwoo neatly folded the envelope and tucked it into Taekjoo’s pants pocket. Then, with a quick "I’m starving," he kicked off his shoes and made himself at home.

Taekjoo remained standing at the entrance, staring down at the envelope in his pocket. When Director Kwak had agreed to his request, his old ID number had been erased. The National Intelligence Service records still indicated that he had died in action while on a mission in Iran. According to Jongwoo, the headquarters lobby had since gained another nameless star engraved on its memorial wall. The staff had even held a brief moment of silence to honor their fallen colleague.

In truth, not much had changed in Taekjoo's day-to-day life. He had given his mother a simplified version of events and let her know his original registration would be voided due to his retirement. Her only concern was that her only son would no longer be involved in dangerous work, and she was willing to accept any changes for that reassurance.

Given that Taekjoo's line of work was never publicly known, and his time in the NIS had kept him distant from family and friends, rebuilding a new identity was relatively simple. The only real question left was what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

"Taekjoo. What are you doing just standing there?"

In the now-noisy kitchen, Zhenya had noticed Taekjoo's prolonged absence and came looking for him. Receiving his new ID had left him momentarily lost in thought, but seeing Zhenya shook him out of it.

"Nothing, it's nothing. Let's head back in."

Taekjoo flashed a grin and began turning toward the kitchen, but Zhenya abruptly grabbed his wrist. Looking down, Zhenya silently examined the scrape on Taekjoo's palm from his earlier fall.

"You haven't even treated it yet."

"It's just a scratch. It'll heal on its own."

For Taekjoo, minor injuries like this were so common they hardly registered anymore. But Zhenya didn't seem to share that indifference. Without hesitation, Zhenya carefully inspected the wound, then lowered his head and licked it. His soft tongue moved gently over the scrape, as if tending to it with the utmost care.

Sometimes, it felt like Zhenya looked after Taekjoo's body more attentively than Taekjoo did himself. In response, Taekjoo reached out and playfully tousled Zhenya's hair, leaving it in a messy disarray. Zhenya lifted his head and stared at him with a puzzled expression.

Now, as always, all of Zhenya's questions, curiosities, and attention were singularly directed at one person. Beneath it all, there lingered an unwavering, deeply devoted affection—so out of place and yet so entirely his.

Life might bring moments of emptiness or introspection, but Taekjoo felt certain he wouldn't regret the choices he'd made. No, he *wouldn't* regret them.

The table was overflowing with food, so much so that bowls had to be stacked on top of each other, just like in a traditional Korean banquet restaurant. It was the first time since her husband's colleagues had visited during his lifetime that Taekjoo's mother had prepared such an extravagant spread. The sheer amount of dishes made it hard to decide where to start, let alone whether anyone could sample everything.

"There's not much, but please help yourselves."

"Oh, what do you mean there’s not much? This table looks like it’s about to break! I feel like a king today!"

"You worked hard helping out, too. I’ll pack some leftovers for you later, so take them home and enjoy."

"Thank you! I’ll eat well."

Jongwoo replied, smiling as always. Taekjoo, however, cast an unimpressed glance at Jongwoo. His cheerful demeanor as he picked up his spoon was suddenly interrupted when he flinched—not because of Taekjoo’s disapproval, but because of Zhenya. Sitting beside him, Zhenya was glaring at Jongwoo with unmistakable hostility.

"Ah, um... Mr. Yevgeny, you should eat a lot too.”

"Hey, how much longer are you going to keep speaking so formally? You two are friends, aren’t you?"

"Friends? With him? No way—!"

"Oh my, really? Jongwoo and the ambassador are the same age?"

Before Jongwoo could vehemently deny it, Taekjoo's mother clapped her hands together, delighted by the revelation. She alternated glances between Jongwoo and Zhenya with an immensely satisfied expression. Jongwoo gave an awkward laugh.

"It’s just a coincidence that we were born in the same year, ha ha ha."

"All the more reason not to act so formal. You’re always coming to our house, so you’ll keep running into him. How long are you going to keep this up? He’s not even an ambassador anymore."

"That’s exactly why it’s scarier! He’s got nothing to lose—who knows what he might do!"

"...Hmm? You’re scared of the ambassador?"

Taekjoo’s mother tilted her head in confusion and looked at Zhenya, who met her gaze with a soft smile. Whatever doubt she’d had vanished in an instant.

"Is it because he’s so tall? He’s so kind, though."

"Ahaha, ha ha, I just... have a little anxiety around foreigners."

Jongwoo stammered, desperately trying to come up with an excuse. He started shoving food into his mouth indiscriminately, cheeks puffed to the brim, giving double thumbs-up and clapping his hands to show how delicious everything was. Taekjoo’s mother, delighted by the exaggerated praise, kept offering him more food, filling his water glass, and encouraging him to eat slowly.

"Stop glaring and eat your food."

Taekjoo muttered, giving Zhenya's foot a light nudge under the table. Finally, Zhenya's sharp gaze left Jongwoo and shifted to Taekjoo. He motioned toward the food, signaling him to start eating. Zhenya, still expressionless, picked up a fork and attempted to scoop some japchae from his plate, but the slippery noodles slid away without fail. Taekjoo's mother sighed audibly. Zhenya silently turned his eyes to Taekjoo, wordlessly seeking assistance.

"Ugh."

Taekjoo grumbled, grabbing a pair of chopsticks to pile a generous portion of japchae onto Zhenya's plate. Without missing a beat, Zhenya twirled the noodles around his fork and neatly popped them into his mouth. If he could do it himself, why the act?

"Here, give him some of this, too."

Taekjoo's mother said, pushing ribs and pancakes toward Zhenya. When Zhenya finished his plate, he fixed his steady gaze on Taekjoo once more. Sighing, Taekjoo began transferring various side dishes to Zhenya's plate, stacking them high.

Olga watched the scene with a look of sheer disdain. Zhenya, completely unfazed, speared a perfectly cut piece of galbi and ate it with satisfaction.

Unable to hold back, Olga sneered sarcastically.

"So, Taekjoo, you're not dating—you're babysitting instead?"

"And who's the one that turned him into a big kid in the first place?"

Coming from someone in the Bogdanov family, it wasn't exactly a fair accusation. Zhenya, who had been quietly listening, raised his chin slightly in response. Olga's face instantly twisted in a frown.

"A big kid? No matter how you spin it, how can you call that man a child? You've got some nerve."

"Big talk, considering you dumped him on me and walked away."

"We didn't dump him on you. You were the one who decided to pick him up"

"Oh, is that right? Then why not act like you've washed your hands of it? Why keep coming back and meddling?"

"I've never done that!"

"Oh, didn't you just say 'we' earlier? You sure change your tune fast."

"Are you trying to pick a fight?"

"You started it. Why bother coming here if you didn't want to see something you don't like?"

Grumbling under his breath, Taekjoo picked up a piece of jeon and placed it on Zhenya's plate. Meanwhile, Jongwoo's eyes darted nervously between Taekjoo and Olga, who were locked in a tense exchange. No matter how thoroughly he chewed his food, it felt stuck in his throat. Zhenya, entirely unbothered, continued eating his meal as if none of this concerned him.

"Look at this! Aren't these rice cakes the ambassador made just beautiful?"

Taekjoo's mother, holding up one of the rice cakes, broke the tension in an instant. Her chopsticks gripped a perfectly symmetrical piece, the kind you'd think was made by a machine. Zhenya's handiwork stood out even more in comparison to the clumsy, dumpling-like shapes made by Taekjoo, Jongwoo, and Olga.

Indeed, Zhenya seemed naturally skilled at anything that involved using his hands.

"In Korea, there's a saying that if you make beautiful *songpyeon*, you'll have beautiful children. Of course, with the ambassador being so naturally handsome, it's only expected his children would be, too."

Taekjoo's mother explained with a warm smile. As usual, Zhenya turned his gaze toward Taekjoo. Olga, too, looked on with curiosity, intrigued by what Taekjoo's mother was saying as she held up the rice cake for a moment.

"Oh, it's just that in Korea, there's this belief that if you're good at making *songpyeon* or dumplings, your kids will be born pretty. Taekjoo's mom is saying that since Mr. Yevgeny is so good with his hands, his kids would definitely turn out beautiful."

Jongwoo interjected, obliviously translating what didn't need to be said aloud. Zhenya chuckled softly at this and tilted his head toward Taekjoo's mother.

"I don't know, I think we'll only know once it's born. Your son doesn't seem to have much skill with his hands, though."

Olga nearly choked on her drink, coughing uncontrollably. This lunatic really had no filter, even at the dining table.

"Oh my, are you okay?"

"Miss Olga, are you all right? Here, have a tissue."

Jongwoo said, quickly trying to help. Neither Taekjoo's mother nor Jongwoo had understood Zhenya's comment, so they busied themselves tending to Olga, while Taekjoo silently shot Zhenya a withering glare, clearly signaling him to shut his mouth. Zhenya, unfazed, merely raised an eyebrow as if he didn't see the issue.

Once Olga had recovered her composure, Taekjoo's mother turned back to Zhenya. "Now, where were we?" she mused, her gaze expectant.

Fearing where the conversation might lead, Taekjoo abruptly stood up. Naturally, this drew everyone's attention to him.

"Looks like we've all had enough to eat. Let's start clearing the table."

"What's the rush? The guests are still here. Why are you in such a hurry?"

"It's just that the smell of food lingers. We should clean up quickly so we can relax. If we drag it out, we'll be tidying up until dawn."

"How about we make a game out of it? We could play *Yutnori* and bet on who does the dishes. It'd be a great way to introduce Mr. Yevgeny and Miss Olga to a traditional Korean game!"

Jongwoo chimed in with a cheerful grin. It was clear he had no plans of leaving anytime soon.

"There's a dishwasher, why would we need to bet on anything, you idiot?"

"Still, we have to do at least a bit of the dishes, right? Besides, there's so much to wash today, we won't be able to do it all at once. It'd be a nuisance to have the dishwasher running until dawn."

Taekjoo was about to retort, questioning why they were making unnecessary fuss over it, but his mother interjected with a smile, agreeing readily.

"Well, I suppose we could do it that way, to keep up the festive spirit, right?"

The Yutnori board was set up without much thought. There were five of them, so Taekjoo's mother and Olga teamed up, and the remaining three played individually. They decided the order with a game of rock-paper-scissors and took turns throwing the sticks.

For some reason, every time Taekjoo's mother and Olga threw the sticks, they either got Yut or Mo. The two of them quickly gained an advantage, each moving two pieces ahead. Meanwhile, Jongwoo kept getting only the Dog. In a game where everything is determined by luck and split-second decisions, it was hard to believe how unlucky he could be. When it was Taekjoo's turn, he too mostly got Dogs, but using Jongwoo's pieces as stepping stones, he didn't fall behind too much. Jongwoo, however, was frustrated every time Taekjoo passed him, stepping on his pieces.

"Ah, Sunbae! Why are you doing this? It's so cheap."

"Cheap? I need to make a living too."

While they were bickering, Zhenya threw the sticks and got Yut. The piece that had been charging forward, even stomping on Jongwoo's piece, was immediately caught. But it didn't stop there. Every time Taekjoo threw a Dog, Zhenya threw a Dog as well, and every time Taekjoo got a Gyeol, Zhenya got a Gyeol. There were rare moments when, after a Mo, a Gyeol came up, and Zhenya would take the long route to catch Taekjoo's piece that was stuck

on the third square. As a result, Jongwoo, Taekjoo, and even Zhenya herself couldn’t make any progress.

It was just a game of Yutnori, but somehow it was making their blood boil.

"Hey, you bastard! Go on your own path! Why do you keep messing with my pieces?!"

"Well, you're in front. How could I not catch you?"

"What, you bastard? Do you want to die together?"

"Taekjoo, there are plenty of ears listening, but you have no shame."

Zhenya grimaced even as Taekjoo grabbed his collar. He then started to rub the inside of Taekjoo's wrist with his thumb, as though teasing it. Zhenya couldn't understand why Taekjoo was acting so smug, or what had been said that could have made him act that way.

Olga, who was having the time of her life, ignored the two and focused on the game. The pieces fell perfectly, just like magic.

"Now, let's carry on! We'll take you all the way!"

In an instant, all four pieces converged at one point. Still stuck at the starting point, Yoon Jongwoo tried to stop Olga.

"Hey! Miss Olga, that's too greedy!"

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime chance!"

In the blink of an eye, the situation turned. Yoon Jongwoo, growing anxious, began pushing his back.

"Catch him! Catch him, quickly!"

"Ah! Sunbae, you're holding me, how can I catch him?"

After catching Yoon Jongwoo’s piece, Zhenya moved his piece to the fifth square. The four pieces of the mother and Olga were just four squares ahead. Only Taekjoo himself had the chance to send them all back to the starting point and take the lead by himself.

He stared at Zhenya with desperate eyes. Taekjoo casually threw the Yut sticks. It was Yut. Zhenya watched in disbelief. The additional chance resulted in a Dog.

"...No."

"Strangely, Taekjoo, when you say it’s not possible, I just want to do it more."

Desperately shaking his head, Zhenya, without hesitation, moved forward and captured Taekjoo's piece. Then, once again, he was given another chance and threw the Yut sticks. The Gyeol appeared, and Taekjoo’s piece landed squarely in the center.

Taekjoo swallowed his frustration and quickly began thinking. The mother and Olga's pieces had already passed the center, so they would land on the starting point. The next turn, if Zhenya threw a Gyeol, he would capture all four pieces, giving him a chance to win. The problem was, Zhenya was now so focused on capturing Taekjoo's piece that he might prioritize that over everything else. Even if they worked together, it seemed like everyone around them was an enemy.

Olga threw the Yut sticks with all her might. The sticks made a clicking sound as they landed. When an unfamiliar result came up, Olga tilted her head in confusion.

"Huh? What is this?"

"Oh my, it's Baekdo."

"Olga, you need to go back one space."

"Mm? If I go back..."

Olga's eyes slowly darted around. Soon, she noticed Zhenya's piece right behind theirs. With a triumphant smile, she moved her piece backward and sent Zhenya's piece flying far off the board. Zhenya just chuckled in disbelief.

Before he could even react, the mother threw the Yut sticks again. To everyone's surprise, a Mo came up. The two didn't even give Zhenya a chance to retaliate and seized the victory immediately.

"Yay! We won!"

Olga, drunk on the thrill of victory, hugged Taekjoo's mother tightly and rubbed her cheek against hers. She smiled brightly and patted Olga on the back.

"See, I should have had a daughter."

"Huh? What did Taekjoo's mother just say?"

"Olga is so pretty, she wishes you were her daughter."

Yoon Jongwoo eagerly translated, adding a touch of personal sentiment. Olga blinked in surprise, then giggled.

"Think of me as a daughter. Who knows, we might really become family."

"If you keep this up, go home already. Hurry up."

"Oh? Do people in Korea chase out guests like this?"

"How many times do I have to say it? You're not a guest, you're an unwanted one."

While Olga and the others were still playfully bickering, the mother and Yoon Jongwoo blinked and stared at Taekjoo. They seemed curious about what Olga was saying in Russian.

Unable to directly translate, Taekjoo quickly made up an excuse.

"... She’s thanking you for looking out for her."

"Hmm? Isn't 'thank you' in Russian 'spasiba'? It didn’t sound like that at all."

"I can understand it, you little shit."

Taekjoo snapped at Yoon Jongwoo, who had made a sarcastic comment. Just then, Zhenya, who had been quiet the whole time, slowly looked back and forth between the two. Yoon Jongwoo, pale, quickly explained that it was actually a rude word. Zhenya didn’t seem to believe it. Yoon Jongwoo, in a hurry, grabbed Taekjoo’s pants leg, asking him to confirm the explanation. With a sigh, Taekjoo got up. Naturally, Zhenya’s gaze followed him. He motioned toward the kitchen.

"Get up. You lost, so you need to go do the dishes."

Zhenya immediately looked at Yoon Jongwoo. All three of them had returned to the starting point, but Zhenya seemed puzzled that he, of all people, wasn’t the one tasked with washing the dishes.

"What are you two talking about, just the two of you? You should let me in on the conversation too, so we can communicate."

"Hmm..."

"You’d probably prefer to be alone with me anyway."

At these words, Olga visibly grimaced and made a strange sound. Taekjoo’s and Yoon Jongwoo looked at her in confusion.

Ignoring them, Taekjoo once again motioned for Zhenya to follow him and entered the kitchen first. As soon as he stood by the sink, Zhenya followed quickly and suddenly hugged him from behind. Resting his head on Taekjoo’s shoulder, Zhenya rubbed his forehead against the back of his neck. Taekjoo felt the breath against his neck, slightly amused.

"Yutnori is quite fun, isn’t it?"

"Fun? It’s just frustrating."

"But you can catch me as much as you want, right?"

"Ha. Your taste is really strange."

"The last person who should be saying that is you."

Taekjoo roughly messed up Zhenya’s hair, then raised his head and kissed his cheek. Zhenya immediately turned his face and kissed him back. *"No,"* Taekjoo said, pulling back, but Zhenya stubbornly leaned in again, pressing his lips to Taekjoo’s.

Amid the sound of laughter from the mother, Olga, and Yoon Jongwoo not far away, Taekjoo was sweetly overcome by Zhenya.

The next afternoon, they visited the National Cemetery. The three of them, who had drunk heavily until dawn and used that as an excuse not to go home, were with them.

Olga, as usual, wore a black mini dress with a cape and held a lace parasol. It was a different design from the one she had worn before. Had she intentionally bought a new one? Yoon Jongwoo, in his usual carefree manner, volunteered to be the photographer. Olga moved slightly and struck different poses in front of him. She left hundreds of photos in a single spot. Occasionally, she pulled her mother into the pictures as well. Perhaps because of this, her mother, who always looked so solemn when visiting her father and brother's graves, couldn't stop smiling.

After watching them for a while, Taekjoo turned his head forward. In front of his father's tombstone stood a plaque engraved with "Tomb of Lieutenant Colonel Kwon Hohyun of the Army." He had been only forty-five when he died in the line of duty. For a soldier, it might have been the most noble and honorable death. Taekjoo himself had arrived at this peaceful moment today thanks to his father's dedication, and as a citizen, he felt indebted to him. But for the family left behind, his absence was a deep and long-lasting sorrow. When he thought of his father, pride and resentment always conflicted within him.

As he stood there, Zhenya quietly placed a white lily at the base of the tombstone. Taekjoo watched silently for a moment before speaking.

"I've always wondered. What kind of life did my father live, and what was he thinking when he passed away? Even after experiencing the lives of the family left behind, what made my brother choose to become a soldier? Is protecting the country so meaningful that you would give up your own safety or happiness?"

Zhenya raised an eyebrow, seemingly surprised. It was a feeling Taekjoo had never shown before. He shrugged and added.

"I couldn't understand it, so I thought maybe I'd understand a little if I were in the same position."

That was the reason why Taekjoo had once been so captivated by a special forces recruitment ad he stumbled upon. It was also why he hadn't hesitated when the National Intelligence Service offered him a scouting invitation. At the same time, it was the basis for his previous statement that he didn't have any particular patriotism.

Zhenya paused for a moment before asking.

"So, did you understand?"

Taekjoo shook his head without hesitation.

"No. I'm not those two people to begin with. Even if my circumstances were somewhat similar, I couldn't fully empathize with their feelings."

"Yet you managed to hold on?"

"It wasn't so bad. It felt rewarding, testing my limits, completing an impossible mission. It boosted my self-efficacy and gave me a thrill like no other."

A faint smile played at the corners of Zhenya's lips.

"Sounds like something a masochist would say."

"Who's the masochist? You've got no shame, talking like that in front of someone else's father!"

"How surprising, Taekjoo. If you have ears to hear, you must have already seen what we've been doing, right?"

Taekjoo was at a loss for words in response to the bold retort. This time, it couldn't be called a logical leap. He tapped Zhenya's shoulder, signaling to drop it. Even after being hit for no reason, Zhenya kept grinning. Then, gradually losing his smile, he asked in a more serious tone.

"So you're willing to give all that up?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Working for the country might be an indirect way to protect my family, but there's no place for me in that. Everything I've done, it's just been for my own satisfaction. None of it's ever been recorded or should be. Suddenly, what's the point of a life like that? After coming back from the dead, it all clicked. I'm suffocating from my own pain, and people are talking about honor? Patriotism? What use are those? I start to doubt whether the things I believed were right even served any greater justice. It's time to leave all of that behind."

Zhenya, who had been quietly listening, casually threw in his thoughts.

"You took a long time to figure that out. It's not such a complicated issue."

"Yeah, well... If I hadn't met you, Zhenya, I'd probably still be lost."

"So, am I your answer?"

Zhenya asked, his expression brightening with curiosity. For a brief moment, his pale blue eyes seemed to shimmer with clarity. Taekjoo hadn't thought about it that way before, but there was no need to disappoint him.

After a pause, Taekjoo gave a nonchalant response.

"Well... it's not the textbook answer, but whatever. We have a saying that as long as you head to Seoul, it doesn't matter if you go sideways to get there."

Zhenya's brow furrowed, confused. He didn't quite like vague answers, but Taekjoo was already chuckling, ruffling his hair. The playful gesture made Taekjoo's face light up with a sense of ease.

"I'm saying I'm satisfied with your answer."

For a moment, Zhenya's eyes widened, then softened, as if they were melting into something warmer. His gaze became more tender, and his eyelids lowered slightly in an expression of intimacy, signaling a kiss.

"Madam! What's this? I've never seen this flower before!"

Jongwoo's voice echoed through the stillness of the cemetery as he made a sharp turn with Taekjoo's mother and Olga, calling them over to the other side. His frantic tone cut through the air, drawing attention.

Taekjoo chuckled softly, then gently cupped Zhenya's chin, leaning in for a kiss. As the golden sunset bathed them, their lips met, and the fading light seemed to create a halo around them, encircling the two lovers.

In that sacred space, Taekjoo buried the man he had been, vowing to move forward. His chest filled with a pleasant thrum of anticipation for a new life—one that would never again feel lonely or boring with Zhenya by his side.

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The End

Chapter End Notes

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I can't believe this is the end! It feels like just yesterday I started translating this beautiful novel. I can't express how much I love Codename Anastasia and Zhenjoo. I'm beyond grateful for all the support I received throughout this project—thank you all so much!

For now, I'll be putting the translation into revision mode. So, if you see updates in the future, it'll just be me hunting down and fixing any typos or mistranslations I might have missed, lol.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!